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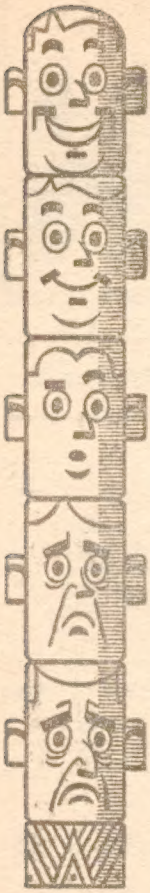

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Volume 13 | April, 1947 | Number 5

SUSPENSEFUL NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

DARK CANYON ..... By Al Cody 10

Allerton knew someone was trying to sabotage his freighter wagons, and likely kill him off as well. But the only suspicious circumstances seemed to point to Allerton's best friend, Fortune Raine. Could a frame-up against Raine, either getting rid of him, or driving Allerton to gunsmoke action against him, be part of the mysterious undercover business, too?

NOVELET

GUN-TRAIL CODE ..... By Abel Shott 90

Cy Roberts knew that the time would come when he had to face Bones Tangley, and give him the satisfaction Roberts owed him. But, meanwhile, he'd follow the code of the lawmen and side Tangley in this present tight.

SHORT STORIES

MAN IN BUCKSKIN ..... By Brett Austin 70

A true story of the Old West.

HANG THE DEADWOOD ON HIM ..... By Weston Clay 72

The case against King Lorenz for backshoot murder was pretty tight, except for . .

GUNSMOKE PAYS A DEBT ..... By Lee Floren 78

Jeff Webb remembered his father, hanged for owlhooting, and knew that in the next few hours, the choice he made now would determine whether he met a similar end.

A TOMBSTONE FOR TOOMBES ..... By Ray Hayton 86

There was just one more thing old Toombes wanted out of life.

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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Learn by PRACTICING in Spare Time

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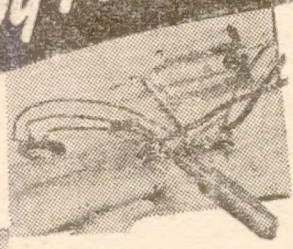
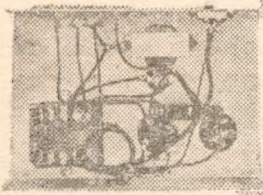


KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.

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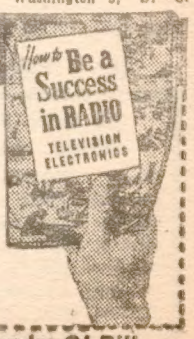

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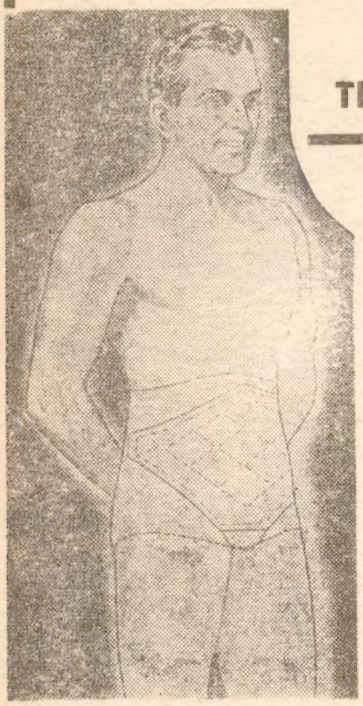

MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

You instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE

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BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET

The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier...your wind is longer...you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER

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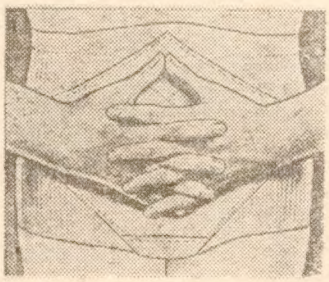
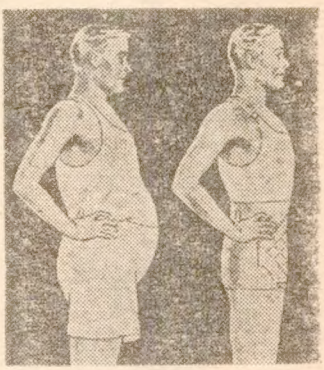
COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!

The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence...and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!



*THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A porous non-stretch material is built into the Special stretch body of the COMMANDER . . . in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most. **NO BUCKLES, LACES OR STRAPS.**



Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."

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"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."

Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."

J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."

P. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

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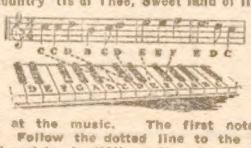
"My country 'tis of Thee, Sweet land of liberty"



Look at the music. The first note is "C." Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find other notes the same way. Strike the notes as indicated and you'll play the melody of America.

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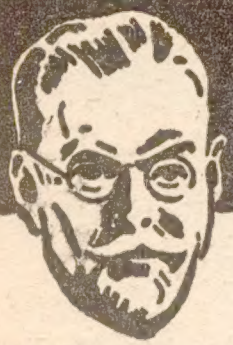

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ADVICE TO READERS:

who are suffering the miseries of

BAD SKIN

Stop Worrying Now About Pimples and Blackheads

and other externally caused skin troubles

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS

SQUEEZING pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Because doing so may also be injurious and leave your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally caused skin troubles. You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.

Good-Looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same healthy, normal complexion free from externally caused skin troubles simply by giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime*—something that ordinary cleansing may not do. In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of incomplete or faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like Viderm Skin Cleanser which penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. When followed by a quick application of Viderm Medicated Skin Cream, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out; they dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free of the specks that often bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself wide open to miseries. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double Viderm treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clear and blemish-free complexion.

It's Foolish to Take Bad Skin for Granted

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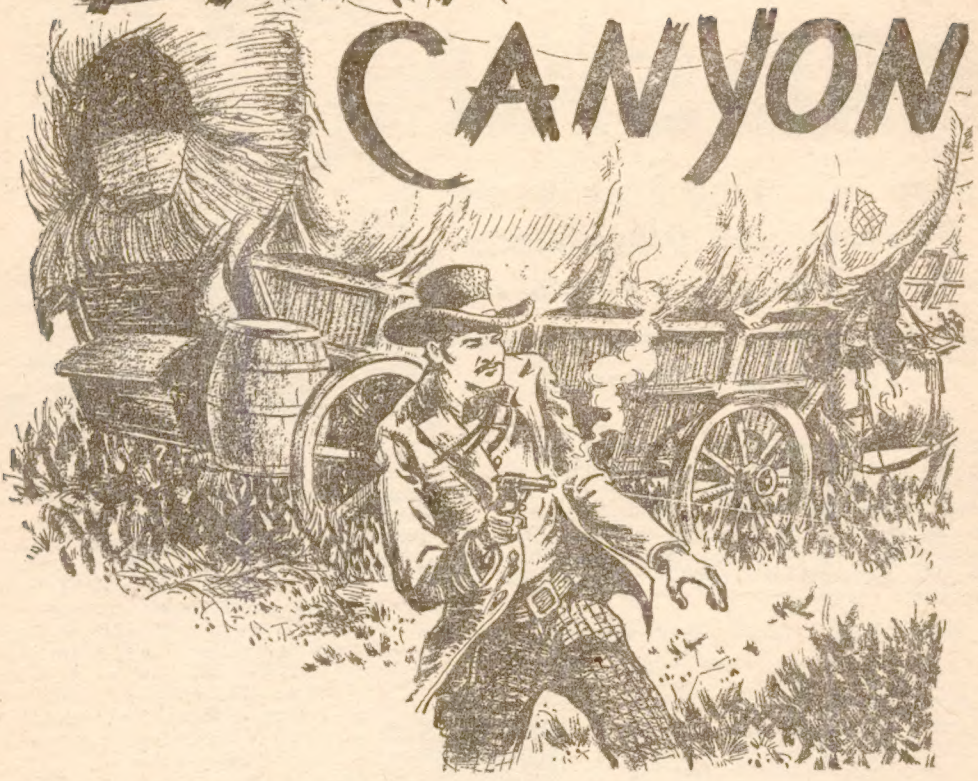
DARK CANYON



A hidden enemy was out to sabotage Allerton's wagon train and kill him, if possible. That he suspected. But what did these mysterious warnings about the danger of seeming friends mean?

JUST LAY IN a long thin haze above the great road as Allerton sighted it. It extended for a full mile without a break, and he reflected a little wryly that within a matter of days, or weeks at most, the wagons heading into the sunset would be so thick that there would be no breaks at all from dawn to dark. That would make for good business, and he should be pleased, of course. Business was what he was here for now. But, lounging there in the saddle, allowing his tired cayuse a breather, he knew a sharp moment of nostalgia for the days which would not come again.

Even three years ago there had been little travel through this country. A few hardy souls had made the perilous trek to Oregon, but mostly the Indians and the buffalo had possessed the land, with Sioux and Pawnee quarreling over a heritage already being taken from them.

Wagons had moved singly or in little, faltering groups, but the Indians had been friendly, since white men were more of a curiosity than anything else.

The last year had changed all that. A few wagons still moved on to Oregon, but out of the great masses of them which the uneasy east had spewed forth, most were heading for California and its fabled streams of

Brand New Novel—Complete In This Issue

By AL CODY

gold. It had been a hectic year, had '49, with the road choked with humanity across a thousand miles. But this year's migration promised to be worse.

Six of those wagons which churned up the dust were his own. Allerton could tell them readily, the slow-moving, heavy-laden freighters. The other half-dozen were prairie schooners, typical emigrant outfits, their canvas was stained and faded. Oxen moved with a footsore weariness, even the mules on the lead wagon showed gaunt and raw-boned.

He was quite unaware of the feminine eyes which, among others, observed him as he neared the wagon train, or of the approval which he found in those eyes. An easy six feet, dark-haired, gray-eyed, with richly curling sideburns and wide but carefully trimmed mustache, his was the build to set off the attire he wore. A beaver hat, topping a black coat and riding trousers, encased in boots. The trousers showed his legs to perfection; but for the holstered pistol which he carried, he might have been a gentleman on a canter fifteen hundred miles to the eastward.

Allerton was perfectly aware of that fact, and well suited with his appearance. In his mind, a businessman should look like one, wherever he might be.

His own wagons were ahead, creaking forward, each one drawn by six horses which, by contrast with the animals coming behind, were cause for envy. One man drove each wagon, using the jerk-line. Allerton noted them briefly. There was old, tobacco-spitting Lige Noble in the lead, looking dour and sun-dried. Dunlap, Miles, Conner, McHaffey and Porter followed in order. Good men all, so far as handling the teams went. He'd trained most of them to this work himself—

HIS EYES narrowed sharply, fastening on the left hind wheel of the last wagon, driven by Porter. The wheel was wobbling dangerously. Without an instant's hesitation, Allerton raced his horse alongside and flung himself out of the saddle, shouting "Whoa," in a ringing voice which brought all the teams automatically to a standstill.

And not an instant too soon. He saw that the nut had been lost off the wagon wheel, and only good luck had kept the wheel on that long. It was wobbling crazily now, barely on the squeaking axle at all, an imminent danger of pitching away and letting that side of the wagon down with a crash.

If that happened—as it had done to a wagon driven by Porter only a few days before, caused then by a couple of broken spokes—it would not only cause loss and delay with the wagon, but would spill out and probably ruin part of the load of wheat flour. Even as he yelled at the teams, Allerton leaped to set his shoulder against the big wheel, shoving hard to hold it in place.

He felt the wagon stop with a sort of sigh. Black grease, seeping out at the hub, was smearing his coat, but he gave no heed to that. Holding it with all his weight, he called sharply for Porter to come running. Behind, the first of the emigrant wagons had pulled to an automatic stop.

Porter swung to the ground from his perch with an easy deliberation, big boots thudding in the dust, then came slouching back.

"What's happenin'?" he asked, and spat unhurriedly.

"Lend a hand here," Allerton said sharply. "Can't you see?"

Suspicion knifed sharply through his mind as he watched Porter. For a hub burr to come off was inexcusable carelessness—and there had been too many accidents chargeable to Porter of late.

"I got it," said Porter, and set big hands to the upper rim of the wheel. An instant later the thing happened with startling speed. Porter's big boot caught Allerton, almost knocking his feet from under him, and simultaneously, instead of shoving the big wheel back on the hub, as the two of them, lifting together, could have done, Porter twisted outward on the upper rim.

Somehow, Allerton kept his own

feet and leaped clear as the massive wheel, with two tons of weight shoving behind it, crashed outward and down where he had been. It was partly luck, partly his own rising suspicion and perfect coordination of muscles, which enabled him to get clear.

Sudden dismay was in Porter's eyes as he swung about, and it increased to a red flare. He lifted a big paw with a wrench clutched in it, but that was all. Allerton jerked the pistol at his hip and shot at point-blank range, and Porter, a surprised look spreading loosely across his face, collapsed at his feet. Flour from a broken barrel made a white smudge as it cascaded out the lop-sided corner of the wagon box and sifted across him.

"Oh!" It was a woman's gasp as Allerton turned. "What a cold-blooded murder!"

ALLERTON had turned, not for a second look at Porter, nor for the other wagons. His interest lay in surveying the damage done to the wreck which, but for Porter's treachery, could have been averted. He saw that the big wheel, which had so narrowly escaped catching him and smashing him to a pulp, was lying flat but unbroken. It would take time and work to unload the barrels of flour and get it on again, but apparently there had been no serious damage, such as might have been expected if the wheel had come off while the wagon was moving forward.

He looked now, his face still tight from the nearness of the thing, and saw who it was that had spoken. Surprise held him for an instant. All the emigrant wagons had stopped of necessity, as had his own wagons in front. Men, women and a few children were crowding up now to see what it was all about.

There was nothing about most of them to merit a second glance. He had seen so many emigrants before that they were an old story, but the girl was different. She didn't look to be a day over eighteen, and her hair was as dark as his own, her eyes brown where his own were gray. She wore a sun-bonnet, of starched blue, cloth, but she had tossed it back, held only by the tied strings beneath her chin, so that the sun glinted on her hair, and showed the anger and scorn and bewilderment in her face.

But it was her face, the calm beauty of it, which held his gaze. There were plenty of women in the emigration—it looked to him sometimes as if all the east was pulling up stakes and trying to make fools of themselves in a mass transplanting—but women like her were rare anywhere or at any time.

He saw her glance travel to the gun in his hand, a wisp of smoke still curling from its muzzle. A brawny, yellow-haired, sullen-faced man was at her elbow, and his own glance held the truculence of a disturbed buffalo bull.

"I never saw such a thing!" he growled. "Shootin' him down that way!"

NEARLY everyone in the train seemed to be there by now. All but old Lige Noble, driving the lead wagon of his own train. Noble, placidly chewing tobacco, was remaining at his post, to make sure that nothing should stampede the teams and set the whole line to running.

But his other four drivers had come back to see what was going on, and were looking puzzled and a little concerned at sight of Porter sprawled there. And on the faces of the other members of the wagon train was the same look of scorn and disgust as on the girl's face.

"Why did you murder him?" she demanded now, and Allerton saw that her indignation gave her a boldness which he doubted if she would ordinarily possess. He shrugged, thrusting the pistol back in holster.

"Murder?" he repeated. "Isn't that rather a strong word for it?"

"What other word is there, Mister?" the yellow-haired man demanded truculently. "We saw it all. He come to help you with the wheel, and when it fell anyway, you jerked a gun and shot him."

"We all saw it," another man

growled. "Coldest-blooded killin' I ever heard tell of."

Allerton sensed that this crowd was mad, ugly with a righteous indignation. Whether his own men would stand with him was a question. They were loyal to him—if they hadn't been corrupted by someone who wanted to see him ruined, as had Porter. That was a question, if it came to a show-down, though ordinarily he'd trust them.

But from the look on their faces it was plain enough that they were bewildered, which meant that they didn't understand this any more than did the emigrants; and they probably had not suspected Porter's treachery. Loyalty now could be divided between the man who paid their wages, and a comrade with whom they had been working. It could, quite easily, develop into a ticklish situation.

"Haven't you got anything to say —to even try to justify murder?" the girl demanded scornfully.

Allerton opened his mouth to answer, and closed it again, though for a moment he felt inclined to let it sag in sheer amazement. But he was being spared the necessity for answer now by the arrival of two others —a man and a girl, driving a fancy, single-seated buggy with top up, the dusty red whels glinting in the sun. It was pulled along by a span of wild running Indian cayuses, and a saddled horse was tied behind.

They had come up at a fast run from the west, appearing over a rise, and unobserved in the excitment of the moment until they drew up with a flourish. Both of them were old acquaintances.

Fortune Raine was, according to his claim, a business-man, though he looked and sometimes acted more like a devil-may-care adventurer of the trail. Mary Jensen, handling the reins with dextrous ease, the sun glinging in her light brown hair, sparkling from her blue eyes, was also fairly to be called an old-timer in this land of the Platte.

"Having a little trouble with treachery, Bob?" Mary greeted matter-of-factly, and, controlling her team easily with one hand, leaned a little farther out of the buggy for a better look at the dead man. "Porter, eh? I always thought you'd have trouble with him."

"Do you call murdering a man, trouble?" the other girl demanded scornfully.

"Murder?" Mary repeated. "You've got the shoe on the wrong foot, I'm afraid. Mr. Raine and I saw the whole thing. Porter, there, tried to trip Mr. Allerton and throw him under the wheel, then pull it down on top of him. Then, when his trick didn't work, he was going to brain Bob with that wrench, only Bob was too quick for him. Isn't that the way of it?" she asked, with a glance at her companion.

Raine nodded, with a smile which displayed his big, well-kept teeth.

"To a T, my dear," he agreed. "And lucky for you that you are quick, Bob. I'd hate to help dig you out from under that wheel, with the weight of the wagon resting on top of that."

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL IN the prairie schooner looked startled. A boy with a man's build, who had been frowning behind her, seemed suddenly abashed. She glanced from Mary to the dead man, and back to Allerton, and her lips formed a round O of distress.

"Is that so?" she asked. "Then—then I was dreadfully wrong. And I owe you an apology, sir."

Allerton swung to face her again, a little startled in his turn. Here was a girl of no ordinary quality. Her eyes were appealing to him for forgiveness and understanding, her face a little wistful.

"It was easy to figure it that way, from what you saw," he said. "Don't think any more about it."

"But how does one forget to remember?" she asked, and in that was so much of poignant truth that he found no ready answer. He looked at Mary Jensen, and turned his head away again, quickly, but not before the other girl had seen the look of

suppressed pain in his eyes. And then, the next moment, they were all talking again, making mutual introductions.

The girl of the wagon train was Vivian Reese, and her's was an all too common tragedy of the trail. A week before, her mother had cooked breakfast, then had sickened as she helped to wash the dishes. By noon, Vivian's father had been sick as well with the virulent plague. No one had doubted what was wrong, for the thing was common as the grass beside the road. Cholera.

By the following morning. Vivian had been an orphan. Hearing the story, Allerton understood better what she meant. How does one forget to remember?

The boy, whom he judged to be about her own age, was Leigh Hunt, likewise an orphan. The yellow-haired man, several years her senior, was Locke—and his air of turculence seemed a part of him.

With night not far off, camp was made on the spot. Allerton saw that the two girls, Mary and Vivian, were already friends. Fortune Raine strolled up to where Allerton stood, once supper was out of the way. From somewhere came the plantive plink of a banjo, then a voice raised in the rollicking Oh Susannah! It was Hunt's voice, but though the tune marched, a thread of sadness was in his voice.

They listened for a minute, with the stars beginning to light up roads across the darkening sky. Raine shook his head.

"It gets them all sooner or later. They start out with high hopes and fool's dreams—and run into this sort of thing!" He shrugged, as if impatiently casting the thought away. "You heading back for Rainbow, Bob?"

"I think so," Allerton agreed. "I'll go right along with the wagons." He grinned briefly, without humor. "I want them to get there."

"Don't blame you none, after what happened," Raine conceded. His voice was very matter-of-fact, casual. "Will you sort of keep an eye out, to see that Mary gets back safe?"

"Why, sure," Allerton agreed. A little of his surprise showed in his voice. "You going on somewhere?"

"Have to go on down the road a piece," Raine explained. "I'd figured on it a day earlier. Only Mrs. Simpkins sent word to town that she was sick, and would Mary come? You know what the answer was," he added drily. "Good Indians are only sleepin' cats, an' they may wake up and pounce, as I told her, but it was wasted breath. So I followed her, soon as I heard. The old lady was better, so we headed up to the road again."

IT WAS A familiar enough story to Allerton, as it was to Raine. Mary Jensen had lived at the little trail town of Rainbow for nearly two years now. During that time, she had received numerous calls to minister to the sick. It made no difference to her whether they were women like Mrs. Simpkins, wife of a trapper well south and east of the post, or Indian squaws. She never refused to answer a call.

The thing had worried Allerton, and he had talked to her about it once, himself.

"I know you've got a heart, big as a wagon canvas in the wind," he had said, grinning a little to take off the implied flattery of the words. "But it's risky business, Mary. This lacks plenty of being civilized country, yet."

"Who would hurt me?" Mary asked. "The Indians are friendly—and they know that I am their friend."

"When they're sober, and feeling good, yes," Allerton had agreed. "But when something goes wrong, or some travelin' trader feeds them trade whiskey—anything's liable to happen. To friends as well as enemies."

The talk had done no good, which was only what he had expected. She had laughed at him. Raine, at the time, had been no better. In his opinion, he had stated, there was nothing to worry about in the country.

Nothing to worry about! With the Pawnees making occasional raids, the Sioux growing sullen, death making fresh mounds for every mile of

every day along the lengthening trail!

Allerton had had hopes, himself, where Mary was concerned, a year ago. But Raine, after working farther to the westward a while, had returned again to Rainbow, and Allerton realized that he had been too slow, too busy with building things up. Too busy, while greater treasure slipped through his grasp. Slow, plodding, prosaic. Mary had accused him of something of the sort once.

They were both his friends, and he had accepted it as it was. Time, he hoped, would ease the sting. And it wouldn't be long until a restless, fiddle-footed man like Raine would be on the move again, taking his wife along with him. He'd been at Rainbow before, had drifted, then returned.

LIGE NOBLE strolled up, to squat on his heels beside the fragment of dying fire.

"The boys are right with you, now," he commented. "They don't approve of that behind-yore-back killin'."

"I can't figure it out," Allerton confessed, perplexed. "Porter was a tool, of course, but who would want to do that to me, Lige?"

"Lots of coyotes about," he said. "Both kinds. You got a good business. Makin' good money, ain't ye?"

"Not bad," Allerton conceded.

"Yeah. And could make a durned sight more, if ye was so inclined. Like that last train load of supplies you freighted in, just 'fore snow-fall, last fall. Ye could have sold that for near its weight in gold. 'Stead of which, ye turned it over for less'n it cost ye, to some of the stragglers. Course, they was hard up, and likely would a bogged down and starved, otherwise—but like I say, the business could be a big money-maker, in some hands."

"I make enough," Allerton said shortly.

"Yeah. It's that rec'lection that made the boys b'leeve ye. But others are more fond o' money. If you was to die, they could take over easy as that." He snapped his fingers. "You hain't married, hain't no kin in these parts." He spat again. "Some folks 'll shake yore hand warm—and stick a knife in yore back with their other hand whilst they're a doin' it," he added, and strode off into the dusk.

Allerton looked after him, perplexed. What did Noble mean by that? Whatever it was, he would say no more till he was good and ready, Allerton knew.

He couldn't think of who it could be that Lige meant, and he didn't like to think of it at all. But he would keep his eyes open, wider than ever from now on. With that decision, he slept.

The usual noises of the trail woke him. Cows were mooing, a few roosters crowing here and there, fowl which had survived the rigors of the road thus far. A mule brayed its displeasure.

Raine had already pulled out, taking the buggy, heading on east. The ramifications of his business kept him on the go most of the time. Mary was already busy, and she called to Allerton that breakfast would be ready in a few minutes. He nodded, and gave his attention to shaving. Ordinarily, that was a chore which could be neglected until he returned to town, but with Mary to ride beside him, this was a special day.

He was wiping the lather from his razor when he heard a step and looked around. It was Vivian, her hair freshly combed but uncovered, loose and a little tumbled, and looking a little shy. She carried a bucket full of fresh milk, the creamy froth dissolving itself in a thousand bubbles on the top.

"I just milked the cow, and thought you folks might like a little fresh milk for your coffee," she explained, and he saw the eagerness for friendship in her eyes, the fear of being misunderstood. "There will be butter, by night," she added. "And buttermilk, of course."

"There's nothing I like better than buttermilk," Allerton returned, and paused to wonder just how long it had been since he had tasted any, fresh from the churn, as a boy in his

mother's kitchen. The reflection of the rolling years was a little startling. "I'll try some in my coffee, too," he agreed. "Be a long time since I've taken it except straight."

LOCKE CAME up now, yellow head hair uncombed, scowling, unshaven. His air toward Vivian was proprietorial.

"Why give away milk, Viv?" he demanded. "We can use all we've got."

"It happened to be my cow, and my milk, Mr. Locke," Vivian retorted coolly. "If you want some, however, I can let you have a little. There's plenty."

"*Mr.* Locke, is it?" Locke demanded, and flashed at Allerton a look of smouldering mistrust. "Gettin' high-hat here, ain't we? I thought you'd cook my breakfast. But if that's the way you feel about it, I can get my own."

He moved away, to Vivian's apparent relief. Seeing the question in Allerton's eyes, she shrugged a little.

"He's from my home town—and he thinks because he has known me a long time that he has to look after me now," she explained. "He—he says that Dad asked him to, just before he died—but I don't believe it."

If his attentions were unwelcome, that was hardly the case with Leigh Hunt. Hunt was a gangling youth just turning man, with a copious crop of freckles and something close to adoration in his eyes when he looked at the girl. Allerton remembered him as one of those who had backed her in her indignation against himself, the day before. Now, plainly ill at ease, he colored and stammered a little as Allerton greeted him in friendly fashion.

"I—I'm right sorry for the mistake we made, yesterday," he blurted. "Guess I'm still sort of a tenderfoot."

"Time'll cure that for you," Allerton assured him. And learned, in the next few minutes, that Hunt too, was an orphan. Because of that, Vivian seemed to regard him in a brotherly light.

Allerton was in a reflective mood when he returned to where Mary had breakfast waiting.

"Why so pensive?" she challenged gaily. "Or does the prospect of my company daunt you?"

"It could," he confessed, and saw her open her mouth to rally him, then, at what she saw in his eyes before he looked away, she was sober as himself for a while.

"Vivian seems to be a very nice girl," she observed.

"Yes," Allerton agreed, absently.

"You'd ought to go a little out of your way to make her feel at home," Mary pursued. "She's lost her parents, and this is all strange and not too wonderful. And she feels pretty badly about the way she jumped on to you, yesterday. She shouldn't be allowed to brood on it."

"She seems to have enough men to look out for her interests," Allerton observed, and was surprised to see a flush mount in Mary's cheeks. She said no more, and he gulped the rest of his coffee, harnessed the horses and hitched them to the wagon which Porter had driven the day before. It was ready to roll again now, and he gave Mary a hand up over the big wheel, climbed beside her, and clucked to the horses. Lige Noble was already setting the train in motion.

CHAPTER III

TONGUES WERE wagging over a grisly morsel. Two nights before, robbery had been committed, with murder. Robbery by a masked man, who had come out of the dark and vanished again into the night like a phantom, leaving only his victims behind.

That was unusual, for while men might fight and sometimes kill in the heat of passion, cooperation was the general watchword of the road, and murder was nearly unheard of.

Two wagons had been looted of valuables. The masked bandit had come upon them, a little off from any others, and had demanded that the owners throw up their hands. One man had started to comply, the other hesitated, not quite understanding. Without waste of time, the raider had shot them both.

What he had not guessed at the

time was that both were married men. Their wives had been back with friends in the main wagon train, some distance off. When they had arrived, a couple of hours later, it was to discover the murdered bodies of their husbands.

There had been one spectator—a crippled boy, nephew of one of the men. He had hobbled off, before the tragedy, to get water from a spring. There he had seen and heard what had happened, but had been helpless to do anything about it. And unable to walk far enough to carry the news.

"I couldn't see much," he confessed. "But he was a white man, all right. He helped himself to what he wanted, fixed it up in a big bundle, an' tied it to Uncle Toby's saddle horse, then rode away, leadin' it. He didn't suspect I was anywhere about, I guess."

That seemed probable, for if the killer had figured that he was being watched, he would have left no witnesses behind.

Mary was sobered by the news.

A couple of years before, from the shelter of a comparatively well-to-do home in the east, her father had suddenly decided to pull up stakes and head for Oregon. It was a fever in the land, a virus that affected heretofore staid and settled men. Tom Jensen had made this decision against the strong opposition of his wife.

His gesture of independence having been made, Tom Jensen had soon discovered his mistake. But at first he had been too proud to turn back; after that it had been too late. And Mary had encouraged him to keep on.

Somehow, she had gotten them as far as the camp of Rainbow, which was certainly no rainbow's end. To go beyond that, with equipment falling to pieces and their money gone, had been beyond even her powers.

With characteristic energy, she had done what could be done—had settled her parents in a fairly comfortable dwelling, half log, half sod. Then, while her mother complained querlously of what she had been forced to leave behind, and her father sat in the sun and dreamed of things which he never would accomplish, Mary had set out to make a living for the three of them.

Against her mother's shocked protest that it was not lady-like, she had embarked upon a career of pie-making. Often it had taken something akin to genius to provide the flour for the crusts and the fillings to go with them, but Mary had managed. The pies found a ready sale at a dollar each, and most days she made at least a score. Mary and her pies were famous along five hundred miles of the trail.

THIS BRIEF excursion away from the town and her pies was in the nature of a vacation, and probably accounted for her high spirits. Certainly she deserved a little vacation.

She rode for a while, rounded chin on palm, blue eyes pensive, staring off toward the wide, shallow glint of the Platte to the north. Though she looked toward it now, Allerton doubted if Mary saw it at all, or the excitedly barking prairie dogs now to the left of the road. Suddenly she looked up and smiled at him again, but the corners of her mouth were tremulous.

"I can't get over it, Bob," she confessed. "Those dreadful killings! Who would do such a thing?"

"I thought you'd met plenty of tough characters, since you hit this country?" he countered.

"I guess you'd call them that," Mary agreed. "So far as looks go. Men who haven't shaved in weeks, or bathed for even longer than that, and of course they go about in any sort of clothes that will hang together. But they're almost all of them real gentlemen when they deal with me, even the toughest looking."

"Most of them take one look at you flanked by a row of pies, and know for sure that they're seein' an angel," Allerton laughed. "So how else would you expect them to act?"

"You have a nice way of saying things, Bob," Mary admitted, and then her smile was gone. "But I can't

help thinking of those poor women and that little crippled boy. It's horrible."

It was horrible; a man could appear anywhere, mingle with the crowd, and no one would suspect him until the moment of his own choosing for murder. And the plains stretched wide to either side, a land where a man could easily lose himself.

But there were bright things, as well. The sun was dipping toward the west now, as though tired from its long climb across the sky. Flowers were already thickly abloom, extending in varied parks and banks for as far as the eye could reach. And up ahead now, completely unmindful of the beauty which nature had spread so lavishly at his feet, Lige Noble was pulling off to make camp.

THERE WAS a regular camp site, and some traveler, with the notion of being helpful to later comers as well as himself, had dug a shallow well. Others had followed his example during the previous summer, and these wells were full of brackish water now. Several of the emigrants were dipping up water, drinking thirstily, making faces, then drinking some more.

Allerton surveyed them critically. Young Hunt was drinking from an old bucket which he had found lying handy.

"Best go easy on that water," Allerton advised. "Those wells are too shallow. It's my opinion that a lot of the sickness along the road is caused by water that gets full of everything."

Locke, his yellow hair in disarray, had been filling a bucket. He turned now, a little of it slopping to his boots.

"That shows all you know," he said. "The ground filters the water, so well water is always good."

Allerton shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he said. "All I know is that I've seen plenty of folks drink such stuff, and pretty soon they're sick—or dead."

Vivian, who had come up with a wooden bucket in her hand, shivered a little in recollection.

"There's certainly plenty of sickness—and death," she agreed, and turned to Hunt. "Better be careful, Leigh."

The boy looked half-resentfully, half-defiantly, at Allerton.

"Good water never hurt anybody," he protested. "And what do *you* drink, if not water? Whiskey?

Allerton smiled a little, inwardly. When Vivian even looked kindly at him, the boy was jealous, it seemed. The notion amused him.

"Whiskey's sometimes better," he said. "When I'm out on the trail, I mostly stick to coffee. Seems to agree with me pretty good."

'I've got some buttermilk here, like we were talking of," Vivian suggested. "If you'd like a little."

"That'd be pale stuff to a man who sticks to whiskey and trail coffee," Locke laughed boisterously.

"Sure, I'd like nothing better," Allerton accepted, and considered Locke for a moment. Here too, was jealousy, but of a different sort than Hunt's.

Mary was already boiling coffee, and he noted with approval that Vivian was following her example. If there was anything in water which could make a man sick—and he'd watched healthy men drink foul water and sicken fast, too many times, to doubt it—then such spores of sickness would have a hard time living in trail coffee. Mostly it was strong and black, well boiled. It took a cast-iron stomach to drink it, but it didn't get a man down.

HUNT WAS drinking coffee, willingly enough, but he was still a little sullen and resentful. He rather ungraciously refused any buttermilk, and then, catching Allerton's eye upon him, went out of his way to cross to one of the wells and drink some more water.

"Nothing like good water to make you feel good," he said. He looked green around the gills, Allerton reflected, and he'd seen others hit the same way. But after a moment, Hunt squared his shoulders, self-consciously, and almost swaggered toward his own wagon.

"If I have to stand watch, after

midnight, I guess I'll get a little sleep," he said. And lifted the canvas flap and crawled inside. Tonight there would be no plinking banjo, no music.

Locke looked pleased. But if he had thought to have Vivian to himself for a tete-a-tete under the moon, he was doomed to disappointment. Vivian came to where Mary and Allerton were sitting, and joined them. Presently she had Mary talking, telling of her own experiences in pie-making. Her eyes grew round.

"I wonder if I could do something like that—not in your town," she added hastily. "I wouldn't want to interfere with what you've built up. But now that I'm all alone, I've got to do something, of course."

"I don't see why not," Mary agreed. "During the emigration months, plenty of people are glad to buy them. And for the rest of the year, trappers and traders keep coming in, and they're always starved for them."

"Starved, is the word," Allerton chuckled. "I remember Jim Bridger coming along, one day last winter. Mary had just set ten pies out to cool. Jim looked at 'em, and planked down a beaver skin, since he was short on cash. And danged if he didn't get away with every one of those pies before he quit!"

"That won't be needful for you, Vivian," Locke, from the dusk beyond the campfire, grunted. "You're goin' on to Californy and gold! I'll see that you get there all right an' get your share!"

"I've seen plenty, already this season, who went after gold last summer, and are going back broke and discouraged," Allerton commented. "A job like Mary's got, beats hunting for gold all out."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a little after midnight that Ezra McHaffey, who had charge of the watch for that night, aroused Allerton, asleep under his wagon.

"I was just to call that kid," he said, meaning Hunt. "He's sick."

Allerton sat up and reached mechanically for his boots. The stars overhead seemed to bend low above the earth tonight.

"Sick?" he repeated, and noted that the moon was a thin silver slice above the distant river.

"Cholera, looks like," confirmed McHaffey dourly. "I ain't told nobody else, yet."

"Don't," said Allerton. "I'll keep watch with him till morning."

"Yeah. I'll take his stand," McHaffey agreed. "Not," he added lugubriously, "that there's anything half so dangerous prowlin' outside, to watch for, as what's in camp a'ready. Give me howlin' Injuns any day to that."

Hunt looked bad, but they always did. And there was little enough that a man could do for the sick, even if he was a medico. Give them something to drink, wash their fevered faces to relieve them a little from the burning, try to soothe them a little when the agony grew too great; or keep them from getting up and doing themselves a mischief.

You could talk with them in moments when they grew rational, and try to give a little comfort—the comfort, at least, of human presence and sympathy when the grim reaper stood on the opposite side of the bed. If they lived long enough and showed signs of outliving the pestilence, you could feed them broth to build up their strength. Beyond that, there wasn't much, save to keep them quiet and warm when the fever left them.

Hunt was asleep, an uneasy, half-troubled coma, when daylight stole into the wagon, under the weathered canvas. Stir ran through the camp, as he had heard it a hundred times before. Men shouting, calling, trying to put a cheerfulness and heartiness into their voices which many did not feel. Presently Vivian's frightened, anxious face appeared at the flap.

"I just heard," she gasped. "Why didn't you call me?"

"There was nothing that you could do," Allerton said. "I've looked after more than one who's had it. Best keep away," he added. "Nothing you can do, and no need to risk any more than you have to."

"But you're risking it," she protested.

"I'm pretty tough," Allerton said soberly. 'It seems to shy away from me."

HE KEPT her out of the wagon though she returned, a little later, along with Mary, bringing his breakfast. They looked in, standing outside, and saw that Hunt was wan and haggard, though flushed with the fever.

"How—how is he?" Vivian asked.

"He's alive," Allerton said. "That's something. When you get your cow milked, bring me some fresh milk for him, will you?"

"Of course," she agreed, and he saw the trouble in her eyes. "I can watch him, today," she said,

Allerton shook his head.

"I've started the job, so I might as well go through with it," he pointed out. "You ride with Mary, and the two of you see that somebody drives my wagon. I'll drive this one, and keep an eye on him. It's all that can be done."

"I want to beg your pardon, again, for misunderstanding you so, at the start," Vivian whispered. "I called you a murderer! And I think you're the finest man, outside of my father, that I've ever known!"

Allerton was deeply moved. For he knew that she meant it. It depressed him, the more so because he was of the opinion that, before noon, he would have the job of digging a grave.

Still, with this thing, you could never tell. Every hour that a stricken victim lived, seemed to add to his chances. Often the fever mounted to a swift, dire crescendo, and brought death almost like a bullet. Those who could survive that first crashing onslaught sometimes pulled through.

Locke, he noticed, was not approaching the plague wagon, nor did anyone else, save McHaffey and Lige Noble, his own men. They both came and inquired if there were anything that they could do, asked for orders, and plodded away, sober-faced. Mary came again, just before the wagons creaked into motion.

"You like to laugh at me, about going off to help the sick," she said. After this, I'll know what to say to you, Mr. Fraud."

Her words were light enough, but she was blinking rapidly as she turned away. Allerton tucked blankets around the sick man to keep him as comfortable as possible in the inevitable jolting of the road, then stepped across to the seat and took up the reins. The mules flapped big ears and stepped sedately out.

But it was not to be a sedate journey today.

Today, Lige Noble was not at the head, setting the pace. Locke had pushed out and around to take the lead, with some of the others following him—trying to outrun danger.

By now, those in the lead were whipping their animals up, trying to force them to a run. Looking through the thickening haze of dust, he saw why. Off at the side was another trail of several wagons, and Locke was in such a hurry that he was swinging out, starting to go past.

"The blasted fool!" Allerton swore.

ALREADY, the men of the other train were voicing objections, yelling profanely. It was the unwritten law of the road for wagons to keep their place in the line-up. He had seen pitched battles precepitated by one train seeking to pass another, without first receiving permission.

For there were excellent reasons against it. First comers always had a better choice of camp sites, of water and wood and grass. That was their right, already earned, and to be jealousy guarded.

Bull-whips were cracking like pistols now, excitement mounting swiftly. The teams had been stirred from their easy-going pace to a run now. The jolting increased, and Allerton swore, looking back at the helpless Hunt. There was nothing that he could do to help the others up ahead, if disaster pounced. With a sick man in his charge, he had to stay here, no matter what happened.

The only thing to do was leave

them go on without him. Hunt could not stand the wild jouncing of a reckless run.

He eased the mules to a steady walk, watching the others gradually fade into the moiling dust cloud up ahead. It hung along the entire line of wagons, a bitter, acrid thing. Gradually fading as the distance increased.

Behind him, Hunt stirred a little and groaned, Allerton pulled to a stop and went back to minister to him.

CHAPTER V

THE NEXT few hours were bad ones. Allerton gave no thought to travel, merely to keeping the sick man from doing himself mischief in the wild delerium of fever, to caring for him as well as he could. Whether it was a good sign, he had no way of being sure, all that he knew was that Hunt was still alive, and some died much sooner than that.

As evening drew on, he had a feeling that the boy would live. It was nothing tangible, but more than once he had had such hunches in the past, and usually they worked out.

He was about to start on again, to travel for an hour or so in the cool of the evening, when he saw wagons coming from the west. First the stained canvas became discernible above the plotches of dust, then the slow-toiling oxen. Few wagons made the return trip, even of those discouraged, bitterly disillusioned. And for a very good reason, most wagons were worn out, or the drivers were dead.

But two were coming now, and there was a familiar look to them. Then he was sure. One was Vivian's wagon, with Mary riding with her. The other belonged to one of their neighbors in the train.

"We came as soon as we could," Mary explained. "For a while, try as we would, we simply couldn't get out of that mad line of wagons. Then Lige Noble managed to swing out, and some of the rest followed him."

"How is he?" Vivian asked, and her eyes were big with the fear of the trail. But there was something else in them, too, as she looked at Allerton—something that had not been there before. A confidence in him, that he would, somehow, make things right.

"I think he's going to pull through," Allerton said, speaking with more assurance than he felt. "Some people have what it takes, and I guess he's one of them."

"Some people are lucky, in having a friend like you," Vivian retorted, and Allerton, quite unaccountably, felt himself coloring.

IN THE dawn, Hunt was definitely better. The burning fever had left him white and wan, but he was rational again and on the road to recovery. They got the wagons under way again, and Vivian rode in the other one. But Mary, and it seemed with sudden perverseness, chose to ride with Allerton.

"You were supposed to look after me, and see that I got back to Rainbow safely, weren't you?" she asked demurely.

"Something like that," Allerton agreed. "Providin' *I* got back safely."

"What do you mean by that?" she challenged, and then laughed, softly. Her hand, white and hard with work, but very soft in its touch, came to rest lightly on his own for a moment. There was the spirit of mischief in her eyes which always seemed to lurk there, but, down under, was something more serious today.

"I think that you have the rather rare gift of taking care of people, Bob," she said. "When you take them under your wing, as you're always doing, they seem to get along all right. Like this boy, here." She glanced back, to where Hunt was now sleeping. "He'd have been dead, of course, but for you."

"I didn't do much of anything," Allerton protested.

"Just enough to make the difference between life and death—which is all there is," Mary nodded. "And you've earned one girl's everlasting gratitude, Bob. That was what I wanted to talk to you about."

"You mean that she's in love with him?"

"Don't be silly. He's in love with her—that's easy enough to see. But he's only a boy, of course, so it's nothing serious."

"He looks about her age, I'd say—or your's."

"Yes. But then, girls are years older than boys, at that age. She thinks of him as a brother, and there's all the difference in the world in those two attitudes."

"Mebby so," Allerton grinned dubiously. "Though I don't just get what you're driving at."

"She's afraid of this Locke," Mary explained. "He strikes me as being pretty wild, and determined to have his own way. And he's also determined to have her, whether she likes it or not."

Casting a sidewise glance at him, she saw the stubborn jut to his jaw.

"He can't do that," Allerton said. "After all, civilization kind of rolls right along with the wagons."

"Civilized customs are a pretty thin veneer for barbarity, at times," Mary reminded him. "What she needs is the protection of a man who is able to really afford protection, no matter what comes."

ALLERTON glanced at her, half-humorously.

"What makes you so sure that she'd want anything like that?" he asked. "I don't make claims to knowin' much about women, Mary—the more I know, seems like, the less I understand, and that's all I am sure of as regards the subject. But I've seen women, red and white alike, swear up and down, right heated, that they hated and despised a man. And a few days later they married him, and showed that they wanted to, too. As I say, I don't understand such things—but maybe it's the same in this case."

Mary shook her head decisively.

"Not in this case," she denied. "I see what you mean, of course. Hate is a strong emotion, the same as love, and sometimes I suppose get mixed up. But Vivian doesn't merely hate Locke. She's deathly afraid of him—the same as a bird is of a snake. That sort of hate is different."

"Maybe," Allerton agreed. "But I still don't see what that has to do with me. Or is it supposed to have anything?"

"It most certainly is," she nodded. "What I mean is, why don't you ask her to marry you? You need a good wife, and she would make you one. By the same token, only more so, she needs a good husband—and you would be one of the best, Bob. She's in no position to go on to California, nor does she want to. But as for making her own living, all by herself, in this country—she isn't the sort for that, either. And I've had my father and mother to live with me, which makes a lot of difference, too. No, it's just about got to be one or the other with her."

Allerton looked at her, a little aghast, definitely startled at the notion.

"Marry me?" he protested. "Why, she hardly knows me."

"She knows you just as well as you do her," Mary insisted. "And don't you think, from what you've seen of her, that she would make a good wife?"

"Why would she want to marry me?" he asked. "Her only possible reason could be gratitude—for what I've done for Hunt, possibly. And that's a mighty poor reason."

"I've seen worse," Mary nodded. "And there might be others. You underestimate yourself as an eligible young business man, who can be charming when he puts his mind to it. You could at least give her a chance to express her own opinions on the subject."

A BAND OF antelope appeared suddenly ahead of them, prancing across the road, white flags flying. Allerton was glad of the diversion. He changed the subject, and Mary, having planted the idea in his mind, seemed willing enough to talk of other things. For his own part, Allerton was resolved to forget all about it. She meant well, of course.

When they halted, for a while, to feed a little soup to Hunt, and Vi-

vian came back and joined them, Allerton found it hard to look at her without coloring. She could hardly guess, of course, that they had been talking about her, but he caught Mary's glance on him a time or so, with a perverse imp of mischief gleaming at him, and grew more self-conscious. He was glad when Mary joined Vivian again, leaving him to ride alone with his own thoughts.

They were not hurrying, so Allerton was a little surprised, at a little past noon, to find that they were overtaking the other wagons, which had so unceremoniously deserted them the day before.

They were halted now for a double reason. At least two of the wagons had suffered in that wild run, one with a broken wheel, another with a broken wagon tongue. One ox had died, caught on the horns of its mate and gored, a man had narrowly escaped being crushed by a wheel. Now repairs had to be made.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a subdued air to the whole train when it went on again, the next morning. They had learned a lesson which would stand most of them in good stead. Lige Noble smiled without humor as he prepared to lead the procession again.

"Had a lot more'n our share of good luck," he nodded. "Could have got spilled, easy as fallin' off a log. None of us did. Got all yore freight here same as ever. Hope our luck don't run out on us to pay for it."

By evening, several of the oxen were showing new effect of the hard run of the day before, including Vivian's team. Their feet were sore, worn by the constant rough going. The only thing, Allerton declared, taking a look, would be to shoe them.

"I've got a supply of ox-shoes in one of my wagons," he added. "They're a pretty necessary item, out this way."

But no one, it developed, knew how to shoe oxen. And, as Locke dourly opioned, they would kick your head off if you tried it.

"Dig a trench," Allerton instructed. "Then throw them, get them on their backs in the trench. They'll do no kicking that way, and I've had considerable experience at shoeing them."

Handled in that manner, it was fairly simple, and he was kept busy far into the evening with several teams. The respect and gratitude of most of the people in the train went up another notch. By now, Allerton was unofficially recognized as the leader of the train.

"It would be nice if we could get him to go along to Oregon with us, and take charge," one man commented, watching the shoeing of the oxen. "He always seems to know just what to do."

"He ain't no tenderfoot, for a fact," Lige Noble agreed. "But as to going on—I don't reckon ye'd get him to do that. He has plenty to sorter keep him occupied, in this neck o' the woods."

"Plenty?" Locke had sauntered up, in time to hear the last remark. He stood now, booted feet spread wide apart, yellow hair shining under the moon, hands thrust superciliously into his pockets.

"What's he know about work?" he demanded. "Ain't nothin' around here for a man to do. There's gold in Californy, and I aim to have my share of it. But anybody that sticks in this country is just a plain fool."

"That's your opinion, mebby," Lige conceded. "But I wouldn't let too many hear me say it."

"Makes no diff'rence to me who hears it," Locke grunted. "I ain't lingerin' in this Injun country much longer, in any case." He turned to where Vivian had just appeared, coming from milking her cow, a chore which had been delayed tonight.

SHE CARRIED a pail of foamy milk in one hand, and her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling. Locke planted himself squarely in her way. She saw him too late to dodge him, and she was too proud to turn back, though her cheeks paled a little as she caught a whiff of his

breath. It was plain that he had been drinking.

"Me, I'm going on, right sudden," Locke added loudly. "Startin' in the mornin'. Going to take my woman along with me. You'd best move yore outfit over to my wagon, first thing come daylight, Viv," he added. "We'll find us a preacher somewhere, and won't waste no time about it."

"I'm not going with you," Vivian said. She was panting, suddenly, as if she had run a long way. "I never wanted to go to California in the first place!"

"Listen to that now!" Locke roared with laughter. "Gettin' coy, ain't you? Where did you think you started out for in the first place, along with your paw and maw? Ain't no place short of Californy fittin for to stop at."

"I never wanted to go there," she cried. "And I'm certainly not going with you."

"Not with me? Listen, gal. Yore dad told me to look after you, and I promised him I would. Only way to do that's to marry you. I been aimin' to do that for a long time anyway, and I been wastin' too much time a'ready, hangin' around with these slow-pokes. Ain't any cause for delayin' no longer now, though, and I ain't going to do it."

"You can go on, just as soon as you want to," Vivian agreed. "Only I'm not going with you!"

She attempted suddenly to dodge around him, but Locke was too quick for her. He reached out, and the fingers of his right hand clamped around her left wrist.

"Don't get in a hurry," he mocked. "You're going with me. You're my woman, and I'm takin' you right along. I—"

The milk in the pail was slopping. With sudden desperation, Vivian swung the pail high, and it came down, spilling over Locke's head, soaking him in a white spray. He jumped back, cursing, while she fronted him now, empty bucket at the ready, eyes flashing.

'It's an awful waste of good milk," she said. "But I mean it!"

"Mean it, do you?" Locke roared, infuriated. "I know what's the matter with you—you need tamin', and I'll know how to go about it, too. You been castin' sheep-eyes at that Allerton feller, ever since you saw him kill a man. Mebby that's what you like, so I'll get rough, too. For after the promise I made your paw, I ain't going to stand by and see nothin' like that happen to you. I—"

"You don't need to speak that way about Mr. Allerton," she flashed. "Since, as it happens, it's him that I'm going to marry!"

CHAPTER VII

FOR AN INSTANT, following declaration, Locke stood still, while fury mounted in him, like a volcano about to erupt. This was the thing that he had begun to fear, and against which he had determined to take steps in the only way he knew. Now he swung about, and looked full into the eyes of Allerton, not ten feet away.

Vivian saw him at the same moment, and knew that he had heard. She had supposed that he was well away from that spot, still busy with the oxen, had spoken with the desperation of necessity, but only for Locke's ears.

But Allerton had heard, and now he was advancing, his face showing no emotion. Indeed, in that moment, it seemed to have been wiped clear of all feeling, to be hard, unyielding. Mary, who had been attracted by the raised voice of Locke and the desperation in Vivian's, watched with suddenly strained attention. She had seen that look on Allerton's face before, and it boded trouble.

Others were coming up as well, sensing that something was about to happen. Allerton paid no attention to them as he continued to advance.

"That being so, Locke," he said softly. "Take your hands off her!"

"I'll take them off," Locke snarled. "But just so that I can use both of them to knock your head off with! If you think you can take my woman away from me—"

He rushed suddenly, releasing Vi-

vian so quickly that she was spun half around, so that she choked back a cry of pain. Before the bulk of Locke, Allerton looked dapper and almost small, save for that look on his face.

Locke was rushing, fully confident in the power of battering-ram fists. Allerton twitched his head to one side, and a ham-like hand went past his ear. Locke's other fist was lashing out, and he used an old trick, doubly effective when an opponent was as careless as Locke was now. He caught that fist in both his hands, and swung his whole body around.

To the watchers, the thing was too fast to see very well or understand. There was a twisting heave, Allerton holding fast to Locke's fist, his back now turned to him. Then Locke was off his feet, rising into the air, sailing completely over Allerton's head, to land a dozen feet away. He struck flat on his back, with a shock which jarred the ground.

For an instant he lay there, breathless, numb, a little dazed by what had happened. Then he was coming up again, his fury increased. It had been a trick, he told himself, and it couldn't happen again.

But he had learned a degree of caution. As he raised up, his hand closed on a rock which lay handy, a stone half as big as a man's head. Mary screamed, seeing it, but already it had left his hand, thrown furiously at point-blank range.

IT WAS impossible to dodge it entirely. Allerton saw it coming and did what he could. He threw out an arm to fend it from his face, and tried to dodge. It struck his left arm, just below the elbow, and went on at a tangent to graze the edge of his head. His arm felt as if it had been broken, and the stone scraped roughly across his ear, so that blood began to run.

But he had little time for any of this. Locke was coming at him now, a little surprised that he was still standing up, but confident that he could quickly finish it. As Locke rushed, he spun about, one jump short of attack, his right boot lashed out in a treacherous kick, aimed full for Allerton's stomach.

Again, Allerton saw it coming, and twisted out of range, stuck his own foot out in turn, and Locke, overbalanced, pitched heavily over it.

Men were breathing heavily, now, women and children, fascinated, awed, were peering from behind skirts or over shoulders as the fight grew in intensity. It seemed impossible to most of the onlookers that it could long continue. Allerton had done better than they had expected of him, for many of them knew Locke's reputation in a rough and tumble, knew his boast that he had never been beaten. To them, as to him, it seemed that luck alone had saved Allerton this far, that he had won by that and a trick.

But he was standing back, waiting for Locke to get to his feet a second time, not rushing in, as he knew that Locke would have done, to jump on him with heavy boots while he was down. This time, though, he was watching warily, agony shooting through his injured arm. It had been half-numbed, was just now beginning to get some feeling back in it, so that he could use it again.

But when Locke fumbled for another stone, he found himself, to his almost petrified amazement, looking into the muzzle of Allerton's leveled pistol.

"Drop it!" Allerton snapped. "If you try anything like that again, I'll kill you!" Then the gun was holsterd as rapidly as it had appeared.

Something like fear was in Locke's eyes now. There was a steel-hard strength to this man which the citified clothes had seemed to hide, an endurance greater than his own. He had to win fast, if at all; he had failed before in cunning, but he had plenty of ruses left.

He advanced again, feinting, drew back a little as Allerton pressed him, then drove his knee up suddenly, aiming for Allerton's groin. If he could land once, it would render his enemy

helpless, and he'd twist that gun away before he could recover.

What he did not know was that he was up against a trained boxer, a man who had been taught to watch his opponent's eyes. Locke had no notice that his face telegraphed his intentions in advance. But now Allerton's hands reached out and closed like the jaws of a trap, behind his knee as it came up. For a second time Locke was caught in a spinning twist and heave, which sent him flying.

Locke had had enough.

"You said you were in a hurry to get to California, "Allerton said. "The moon's bright, so get in your wagon and travel. You'll be well advised to see that we don't catch up with you again!"

Locke shambled off to obey. He swung around, once, to look at Vivian, but she had turned her back on him as though he did not exist. Growling to himself, he drove out of camp.

ALLERTON, a little self-consciously, was brushing the dirt from his clothes. He had not escaped too easily. His ear was still bleeding, and his arm was dripping slow crimson as well, where the stone had hit and slid, tearing the cloth of coat and shirt, breaking the skin. By the next day, he knew, it would be so swollen that he'd have plenty of trouble with it for a while.

His right eye was blacked and nearly closed, his whole face had been bruised like pounded steak in the moments when Locke had managed to batter him. He turned, to find Vivian beside him, her eyes shy, partly with trouble, partly with sympathy.

A painful flush mounted over her throat and face again as she met his gaze, and he understood her embarassment, her desire to speak to him, but the hesitation she felt.

"Vivian," he asked. "Would you mind getting me a basin of water, please? I'd like to wash this arm a little."

He was already stripping off his coat, noting ruefully that no amount of mending, however skilled, would ever make it useable again. That sleeve had helped to turn the savagery of that flung stone, but it was shredded and ragged from elbow to cuff, blood spattered. The shirt sleeve beneath it was in little better shape, and the flesh was darkly discolored, broken and lacerated. Vivian cried out at sight of it.

"I'll get the water right away," she agreed. "Go and sit down, please."

Mary, seeing it, had to restrain her own impulse to hurry forward. But this was a time, she knew, to keep in the background, and most of the others who had collected seemed to realize that as well. When Vivian returned, a few moments later, with a clean cloth and a bowl of water hot from a kettle over a fire, Allerton was alone, seated on a wagon tongue.

He funbled awkwardly at the button holding the shirt sleeve, and she unbottoned it herself.

"Let me," she said. "It will have to be cut off. I'll get my shears."

She was back again in a moment with a pair of shears, cutting the sleeve away, then washing the arm with a gentler touch than he had remembered since his mother's day. After a moment, so low that he could scarcely hear her, she spoke.

"I—I want to thank you—for what you did. But I—I didn't intend to get you into trouble—I didn't know that you were around—"

"I'm glad I was," he said. "He had it coming."

"I know." She raised her eyes for a moment, looked quickly down again. "I—I was desperate—I had to say something. I don't know what you'll think of me—"

"It's easy to understand your not likin' him," Allerton agreed. "All of us have some of the animal in us, I guess, and this country seems to bring it out. And once in a long spell, somebody comes along who'd fit better, back in the cave-man days. He's one of that sort."

"That's about it, I guess," Vivian nodded eagerly. "Oh, you can't understand how much I was afraid of him—how much I feared him! I—I used to think that I'd never be afraid of any man, that I merely despised

him. But lately—well, I am awfully grateful."

"Be better air to breathe, with him out of the way," Allerton agreed. "You sure have a nice way of washin' a hurt like that."

Vivian frowned at the arm.

"It ought to be bandaged and greased, but I haven't a thing to put on it," she confessed. "And your face—"

"They'll both be all right without anything more, except time," Allerton said cheerfully. "One sure thing, I've no beauty to lose, so nobody'll worry about that, anyway."

"You shouldn't say such things," she protested. "You—you make me feel—worse than ever. And I—I'm sorry—for everything—"

"You don't need to be," he repeated, and realized that, if he wanted to, he had only to tell her that he liked the idea which she had spoken of—that she should marry him. He had only to say the word, and after that public declaration, she would have no choice but to go through with it.

But he knew already that what she had said to Locke had been exactly what she told him—the cry of desperation, no more. She had named him because he was the logical one to name, but any other man in similar circumstances would have done just as well.

Let others think what they pleased. Probably the rest of the wagon train would suppose that they were engaged. It might be easier to let it go at that for the next few days, than to bother to explain. And much easier for her pride. Later on, she could on down the long road, wherever she pleased, and that would be the end.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAGONS had been an hour under way when Raine came up with them again. He was still driving the buggy, looking as fresh and unhurried as on the day when he had left them, showing no sign of the long distances which he had covered in that interval. He greeted Allerton with a cheerful hallo and a wave of the hand, and Mary with a gay bit of banter. Though he had known and liked him for quite a while now, Allerton always found the man new and surprising.

It was impossible to guess what Raine would do next, or where he would turn up. Much of that was due to the nature of his business, which, as he frankly admitted, was the salvaging of cast-off articles along the road.

For all of these things, if cared for, would soon be needed by some one else. The main difference between his business and that of Allerton, as he had laughingly explained it, was that Allerton dealt in new goods, and he handled second-hand stuff.

That, he had added, was the main beauty of such a business, which was scattered along the hundreds of miles of trail. You could go when and where you pleased, with nothing to tie you down, and fresh opportunity beckoning at every mile. Now, tied on behind the buggy, was a gaudy blanket, which he had picked up beside the trail.

"I fancy that somebody must have lost it," he said, spreading it to their view. "It's much too pretty a thing to discard—and useful, as well. Maybe I'll run across the owner, by keeping it out where everybody can have a look." He grinned. "Hope they don't accuse me of stealing it from them. But here's something else that I found."

He delved into the buggy, came up with a package, and laid it in Mary's lap. She looked at him, a spot of excitement in either cheek, and started to unwrap it.

"A beautiful lady had that," Raine added, "and it took some persuasion to get her to part with it. But I wanted it, and I pointed out to her that she could buy other things with the money, which might be more useful on an Oregon homestead."

With fingers that trembled a little, Mary lifted it out of the wrapping, held it up, then buried her face in it with a little gasp. It was a bolt of satin cloth, in a light pale gray which shimmered in the light. A beautiful thing, its like rarely seen along the

road. Raine was beeming, hugely pleased.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Mary breathed. "Beautiful!"

"I thought it might make a wedding dress," Raine suggested. "Providing you like it for that purpose. That, I believe, is what it was originally intended for."

"It will be lovely," Mary breathed. "But I wouldn't think that anyone would part with it—if that was what they had planned to use it for."

Raine sobered a little.

"This lady's daughter had intended to be married in it," he explained. "But she died a month back of something or other. So they really had no use for it, of course."

Mary's eyes grew soft with the tragedy of the thing.

"I hope that you paid her mother what it was worth—to her," she murmured.

"I tried to," Raine agreed. "Though of course I couldn't."

FIVE minutes later, Raine had swung up and was riding beside Allerton, his team and buggy tied behind the wagon.

"I didn't expect to get back and catch up with you again before you got to Rainbow," he confided. "But things went better than I expected. Got as far east as Cottonwood Spring, and found half a dozen wagons that had decided to turn back where they came from. They had a lot of stuff that they were willing to sell, too, so I took it and turned back myself."

Raine was to reveal one other of his many sides, before the forenoon was past. There had been a break-down here, such as was of increasingly common occurrence the farther west the wagons traveled. Several wagons had halted to make some repairs. Allerton's pulled up as well, to exchange news and pass the time of day. And here was more news than usual.

With these wagons were the two women, widowed by that recent murder along the trail.

Indignation was still at fever heat, all along the road. Such a callous killing was new, and the results, in this case, had been worse than most tragedies of the road. Neither widow had anything left, as it happened. Now they were being cared for by friends and neighbors, given a place in other, already crowded, wagons. But all that they had of worldly goods was the dresses in which they stood.

"And they were well off, too," the man growled. "Had more good stuff in their wagons than most of us. But that killer sure managed to get away with a haul."

"I thought that he took only a few things, and that he left the wagons," Allerton said, surprised.

"You didn't hear the full devilment of it then, stranger. Seems he snuck back, mebby with help, and got away with the wagons, too, between dark an' daylight. Left 'em plumb stranded."

"That was sure an outrage," Raine declared fervently. "Here, folks, let's all of us do a little to help out. Everybody in this train can chip in something, and never miss it, and so will any others along the road. Here, I'll start it."

He whipped off his hat, held it out, and dropped a handful of gold coins in to it. Several twenty-dollar gold pieces, Allerton observed, as he contributed in turn. By the time that Raine had finished passing the hat, he had collected well over five hundred dollars.

"It isn't much," he said, tendering it, half-apologetically. "But it may help a little, and our heartfelt sympathy goes with it."

"And if we ever set eyes on the fellers that did it, we'll string 'em up to the nearest tree," Lige Noble added.

"Likely they'll get worse than that, if we ever find them," Raine said, glancing about. "Eh, men?"

There was a chorus of grim approval. Allerton saw Vivian, standing a little way apart, and she smiled at him, shyly, and he went across to her. This life was a hard one for the women. But their influence was all that kept the rolling tide of men from reverting to savagery.

"I'm glad—that you're not like

that," she said, her eyes indicating the others. "I thought you were—once, now I know that I was mistaken."

"I killed a man," he reminded her soberly.

"In self-defense, yes," she agreed softly. "That is different. And you would do it to protect others, I know, if it was necessary. But you wouldn't be one of a mob, there's all the difference in the world."

"What makes you so sure?" Allerton asked. "I'm not that certain of myself."

"I watched you when you fought Locke," she explained. "He intended to kill you, if he could. You had several opportunities to take advantage of him, but you didn't do it—not even after he had given you plenty of provocation."

ALLERTON considered this, oddly pleased. He had never stopped to analize his own reaction or why he had done certain things, or left others undone. But this girl was clear-seeing, and her judgment was a compliment. He was still smiling a little over it when Raine came up, hand outthrust.

"Congratulations, Bob!" he exclaimed. "I just heard the news! Why didn't you tell me?" He looked at Vivian, frankly admiring. "You're a lucky dog, any way you take it! When's the wedding to be?"

Allerton saw a flush mounting in Vivian's cheeks, and felt the echo of it on his own face and neck. Somehow he hadn't thought about the news spreading, but of course everyone would believe what they had heard, at face value. And it was not his place to deny it. Not that he was sure that he would have done so, in any case.

"We haven't gotten that far with our plans, yet," he said. "You've been engaged a lot longer, and haven't been rushing too much, you know."

Raine laughed again.

"I'm afraid I've been laggard," he confessed. "But I'm trying to make up for that now. With a hundred women-hungry men around, for every eligible woman, it has just occurred to me what a risk I've been running!"

"If a woman loves a man, there should be no risk, Mr. Raine," Vivian said soberly.

"And that's true enough, I guess," Raine agreed. "But some men are like quicksilver, Miss Reese. You can't ever be sure of whether you've got them or not. I know enough about men to know that, and so I figure women are a lot the same. Not all of them, which is lucky."

MARY CAME up then, laughing at something which someone had said to her. She linked her arm in Vivian's, and the two of them moved away. Raine watched them go, his face more sober than usual, then turned to Allerton.

"Bob," he said. "We're both luckier than we know! Or have any right to be, I guess. Sometimes I wonder how long my luck will hold."

But this moment of introspection was gone almost at once, as characteristically, he changed the subject again.

"I've been thinking about what you said—about settling down. I guess maybe I have been rollin' stone too long. And I've been wonderin'—Bob, why wouldn't it be a good thing for both of us, since our businesses spread over pretty much the same territory, to go into partnership? What would you think about such a notion?"

He laughed, half-deprecatingly, at his own suggestion, and waved a hand.

"I've been watchin' your business, Bob. You're doing mighty well. But you've likely noticed that I haven't done too bad myself, for the last year or so. We follow different lines, but as I say, we cover the same territory, and things are like enough that they could be combined. And together we could handle a lot more than we do now. This way, heading things up, we each have to keep on the go all the time, covering a lot of ground. Either one of us could do it if we had our interests pooled."

"It's rather a new idea to me, but it has its points," Allerton conceded thoughtfully.

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to give me an answer now," Raine protested hurriedly. "Just mull it over, and see how it strikes you. If you think it wouldn't work, that's all right. If you like it, we might work it out. But I've come around to your way of thinking. Most of these folks are hell-bent to reach California, and dig for gold—which most of them will never find, or to get a chunk of land in Oregon, where they can sink a plow. Never stopping to reflect that they could find plenty of fine land everywhere along here."

He had touched a responsive chord in Allerton now.

"That's right," he agreed. "One of these days, folks will wake up, and settle this country. And it will be as much a land of opportunity as they think California is now."

"I believe it's coming, all right," Raine conceded. "So it might be a good idea to stick and grow up with the country. Providing I ever do grow up," he added with a shrug.

No one had thought about Hunt, lying in the wagon, hidden by the canvas. Out of sight, but not out of hearing of what had been said. And definitely on the road to recovery. Allerton raised the flap and looked in, and met the boy's glance fixed on him. It was like a dash of cold water in the face.

"I — heard what was said," Hunt said, his voice still weak, and his attempt to smile was a travesty. "I guess—you've saved my life, Allerton. And so I—I guess I'd better—offer you my congratulations, too."

Seeing the look in his eyes, Allerton knew how hard hit he was by the news. But in the face of the effort which the boy was making, he could not let on. He nodded as cheerfully as possible.

"Thanks," he said. "I appreciate it." And turned away with a disturbing thought. There was a man—who had grown up, overnight.

CHAPTER IX

A LITTLE later, when Allerton climbed to the seat of the wagon and drove on, Hunt turned on his bed to look at him.

"I've been doing some thinkin'," he said. "Back east, I was all fired up with the notion of digging for gold in Californy. But I suppose there's only a few ever find it. I heard what you and Mr. Raine said about this country, and I kind of like it, too. Stands to reason that there's chances here as well as farther west."

"I think there are more chances here," Allerton assured him. "For the reason that, no matter how good a country California or Oregon may be, everybody is hustling there. Here there's still plenty of room, just as soon as you get back off the road."

"And I suppose nobody even owns the road, so far as that goes," Hunt suggested. "If somebody wanted to grab a chunk of land, they could do it."

"I guess that's about the size of it."

"Well—what I was gettin' at—you've got quite a business, haven't you? Would you have a job for me, maybe? I'd be willing to work hard, soon as I get my strength back, and do anything honest."

"Why yes, I think I have a job for you," Allerton agreed. "I've got a farm, north of town a ways. A lot of fine hay grows up there—wild grass, of course, but it makes good hay. I cut it and put it up, and there's a good market when winter comes. Think you'd care for a job like that?"

Hunt's tired eyes lighted.

"That would suit me fine," he agreed. "I was raised on a farm."

They were saying good-by to the river for a while now. It took a curve which the earlier travelers had decided was not worth the following. By taking a short-cut, they could save two days, and two days, in a long spring and summer, could mean the vital difference between success and failure, between life and death. Especially at the far end of the trail,

and if several times multiplied during the season.

Yes, every short cut, every day which could be saved, was vital, even if it meant leaving the pleasanter and safer river for a plunge across wastelands.

Here was such a place. Allerton called a halt, where another wagon train had likewise stopped.

"Better fill everything you can with water," he advised. "You'll need it before we reach the river again."

Some were ready to follow his advice, even to emptying things heretofore considered as essential from casks and barrels. But others demurred or flatly refused.

"You don't catch me emptyin' out half a barrel of good cider vinegar," one man protested. "Vinegar's mighty good stuff in these parts—protects ag'in scurvy an' so on."

"So it does," Allerton agreed. "But you can't drink it if you're perishing of thirst."

"'T won't be that bad, mister. I was just talkin' with a feller that's come acrost there, the last couple days. He says there's ponds, water holes, all the way along."

"He's right," Allerton agreed shortly. "I've seen them. And if it came to a choice, I'd sooner drink vinegar."

But most of them, he found, were disposed to take a chance. It was habitual with most of those who followed the long road. They had taken the gamble of their lives in pulling up stakes and setting out in the first place. Every mile brought necessity for taking some new chance, new at least in their experience. Half the graves which dotted the trail were countable to that willingness to take a chance.

He could insist that those of his immediate train bring extra water, and did so. The others were out of his jurisdiction, but still of his concern. They would travel right along with them for the next three or four days, and if some ran short of water, which could mean life itself, they, the weaker and less provident, always looked then to those who had brought something along. Which, if carried too far, could mean ruin for all.

RAINE HAD gone on ahead, taking Mary with him again. They were anxious to get back to Rainbow, and he could not blame them. Had it not been for Vivian, he too would have ridden ahead, on horseback taking a short cut. His business was at least as important as that of Raine. But now, he had to look after Vivian, and it was not an unpleasant chore.

They swung away from the river, into a country burned brown by the sun, swept by wind which did little to temper the increasing heat of the season.

They made a waterless camp, for none of the water holes had so far materialized. He was caring for the stock when a man rode in to camp on a sweat-stained pony, conferred briefly with Lige Noble, then sought him out. It was one of his own men, who had been clear back to Dogtown to buy more supplies and get them under way.

"Got six more wagon loads comin'," he reported. "Got hold of some good stuff, too."

He had been traveling fast and steadily since leaving there, anxious to report. A good man, who could be depended on without being watched. And it was for that very reason, as he appreciated, that Allerton sent him on such a journey, with what amounted to several years wages in his pockets, to buy merchandise.

"Stopped at Cottonwood Springs one night," he added, and mentally calculated the time. "Night before last, it was. The wagons are gettin' thicker'n fleas on a dog, up to there."

"Raine said that he was there the other night," Allerton nodded. "Said he bought some stuff there."

His employee looked surprised.

"Raine?" he repeated. "Funny they didn't nobody mention it to me. Said I was the only man from the west that'd been that far back this spring. Kinda funny."

It was more than funny. Allerton pondered it, uneasily. Raine had said he had been there, yet now Allerton's own man reported that no one had seen him there. He could hardly be mistaken, for Raine and his business was well known, and if

he had been there, every man would have known it before a quarter of an hour had passed. Cottonwood Springs was no metropolis, and the arrival of anyone, at this season of the year—anyone save the emigrants, was an event.

Yet why should Raine lie about a thing of so little importance? For it could justfiably have no significance. Probably it all had a perfectly and reasonable explanation, but it persisted, like an aggravating burr, clinging to the edge of his mind.

VIVIAN came to sit beside him in the lengthening dusk, spreading her skirts across his own favorite seat—a part of the wagon tongue. He moved to make room for her above him, and found her presence pleasant but vaguely disturbing. She was smoothing at a strand of cloth with nervous, absent fingers, pleating it and straightening it again. She flashed a quick look at him, then glanced away again.

"Tell me," she said suddenly. "The country around Rainbow—is it much like this country here?"

"Not too much," Allerton said reassuringly. It's a green country there, with the river and trees, and little hills. And as you go north and west, you get into the Black Hills. It isn't very far, for instance, to Dark Canyon."

"Dark Canyon," she repeated. "It sounds rather a dreadful place."

"It could be, I imagine," he agreed. "And I guess it has been, in the old days. The valley runs for several miles, with the road gradually climbing. You hardly notice the slope because the whole level of the earth seems to keep rising all around you, so it seems almost level, which is deceptive. Teams have a hard pull to reach the top.

"And near the summit, there is the canyon itself—not much more than half a mile long, where the valley pinches together and the road dips through instead of going clear over the pass. There are quite a lot of trees up above, on either side, shutting out the sun. The road through it is rather narrow and winding, with trees and boulders and a small part of a creek taking up most of the canyon floor."

"What does that mean—a small part of a creek?" Vivian asked curiously.

"That's what it amounts to. A spring gushes out of the mountain, into a full-fledged stream. It runs just a little way, then plunges back out of sight into the hill again. And at the end of the canyon, it breaks into the open for a second time—either that, or another stream. It's a Godsend to the wagons, for it's fine, pure water."

"The wagons run through this canyon, then?"

"Yes. It's the only good way across the pass there, without losing several days, going around. The wagons can't follow the river, for there are too many things in the way."

"I'd think this canyon would be a good place—or a bad one, for an Indian attack," Vivian said, with a little shiver.

"It could be, at that, if there was trouble," Allerton agreed soberly. "So far as I know, there has been no trouble for white men there, though. Years ago, according ot the story, one bunch of Indians surprised another party traveling through it and wiped out all the braves, and carried the women and children away captive."

VIVIAN was silent a minute, and he knew that this talk of the canyon had been only on the fringes of her mind. Something was troubling her, and presently she spoke of it.

"I'm afraid you'll think that I tricked you into agreeing to marry me," she said. "The other day. I—I truly never intended it that way. And now—what I wanted to say," she went on, a little breathlessly. "Is that I—I don't expect you to go through with it—if you don't want to."

Allerton did not immediately reply. He was trying to find the right words. Of course, she had never intended it that way, and now she wanted him to understand. He wanted to tell her that he did understand, but to do it

so that she would not feel hurt or cast aside. It was so easy to blunder with the tongue, as he had discovered, even with the very best of intentions. But now he saw that she had misunderstood his silence.

"When we get there, to Rainbow," she said. "And you're away somewhere, I—I can just keep going on. People will sympathise with you—they'll call me a hussy, and blame me, for being fickle. But I won't be there to care, and that will be the best way out of it, I think. I wouldn't bind you for the world."

Before he could reply, she had jumped up and was gone in the night, into her own wagon. Allerton hesitated, and considered, and decided to let it go at that. He didn't like it, but probably that was the best way. And since it was what she wanted, what else was there for it? Then he smiled grimly to himself. That meant, of course, that Hunt would be going on, too. It looked as if he had lost a good hay hand already.

CHAPTER X

THEY CAME, the next day, to the first of the water holes. Already, those who had preferred to trust to luck and take a chance were beginning to scan the land ahead with an anxious eye, and now they joked and showed their relief. Though it was still a long way ahead, the rank growth of sedge and greenery about it, as well as the sparkle of the sun, told that there was undoubtedly water there. One man even spoke jocularly to Allerton about it

"You know, you half-way like to had us scared," he confessed. "But there's water waiting there for us right enough."

"Yes, there's water there, if you want it," Allerton agreed, and let it go at that.

It was mid-afternoon as they neared the water-hole. The first buzzing excitment at the nearness of water had turned to dismay. A few hardy souls, more eager than the rest, had galloped ahead to the oasis, carrying canteens to fill. None of them had returned with water. Instead, they lingered, disconsolately, and they shook their heads as the wagons moved up, pointing in speechless disgust.

Allerton could understand it perfectly. These water holes, in this stretch of country, were buffalo wallows, nothing more nor less. And from the signs, though they had not sighted any of the big, ungainly beasts for days, a few of them had been here not very long before.

Now it contained a couple of feet of water, collected and still remaining. Here, as Allerton had often seen, the buffalo would stand all during the heat of the day, and water none too clean to start with quickly became thick and putrid, even without the effect of the sun, which had added its green scum to the surface, with millions of tiny animal life darting about in the brackish half-liquid which remained. A more unappetizing, or unhealthful substitute for drink could hardly be imagined.

Because the oxen, mules and horses were thirsty, they drank some of it, though with a marked lack of enthusiasm. None of the others would touch it. Allerton had known men to be so desperate for water that they did drink it, but none here would, while others carried good water which they could be asked to share.

He smiled grimly to himself. There would be a lot more of these holes in the next few days, all of them malodorous. Which meant that the supply of good water which a few wagons had brought, would be scanty before they reached the river again.

But that was the way he had known it would be, and this time no one would suffer seriously from thirst. Later comers, when the real heat of summer struck, might not be so fortunate. During the hottest, dryest part of the previous summer, he had kept a wagon busy here, hauling water to those most desperately in need of it.

THEY SIGHTED the river again the next day, and here were wooded green islands in the river, with plenty of grass and fuel. A little later in the season, when the line of wagons became endless, fuel and grass alike would be a problem, but that day was not yet.

Here was passably good water again, though it was only the Platte. On the morrow they would have to ford the river.

CHAPTER XI

THE EARLY morning sunshine had a garish brightness to it today, as though anxious to reveal what lay ahead in all its stark unpleasantness. For the river was no longer benign and inviting, a pleasant stream to offer water and wood and shelter, as it had seemed when they had pulled away from it before Today it was surly, and the sullen growl of it could be heard a mile away.

Somewhere along its many-branched tributaries heavy rain had fallen, and now the water was high and deep. Never a good crossing, even in its gentler moods, this one was ugly now, and would remain so for days. perhaps for weeks.

Allerton could sympathise with the dismay which he saw in the faces of many of the people gathered for the crossing. Most of them had already negotiated many rivers, and it was coming to be an old story, but one ever knew. For each crossing was a new experience, and the dangers of one river revealed nothing of the tricks that another might hold in its hidden depths. Even the experience of men who knew this crossing, as he did, meant little. For a river could change overnight, a tricky current shifting sand bars, gouging out pits where none had existed before.

But today's sun was showing things other than the river. Here, nearly a mile back from the water, and down-river from the crossing, was one more piece of the floatsam and jetsam which littered the length of the trail—a big wagon, with a broken wheel. And a man industriously at work over a little fire, doing a crude but fairly effective job of blacksmithing and repairing.

He was a sandy-complected man with a head totally bald, and a thick crop of whiskers beneath, and he whistled through his teeth as he worked, intent only on his task, with no glance to waste on passers-by. Allerton, to whom such sights were old, gave only one glance at him, and at the wagon, but Vivian's sudden exclamation arrested his attention.

"Look! That—that is Locke's wagon!"

Looking closer, Allerton saw that she was right. Before starting the long trek to California, Locke had decided to paint his wagon. Evidently he had run short of paint of one color, and had shifted to another. The body and wheels were an Indian red, but the running gear was a short of burnt osher, and the combination was different enough to be distinctive.

Allerton pulled up, studying the wagon through narrowed eyes. The sandy-complected man, becoming aware of this scruntity, looked up and nodded cheerfully.

"Fine mornin', folks. Don't know when I've seen a finer. Somethin' I can do for ye?"

"We were just wondering about your wagon," Allerton explained. "It looks remarkably like one that belonged to an acquaintance of ours."

"Big, yellow-haired feller, sort of a surly way of actin'?"

"That sounds like him."

"Likely 't was, then. He got along this far and busted down. And me, I'd busted down with my own wagon, only a sight worse. Couldn't figure how'n tunket I was going to get fixed up and go on. Be a shame to miss out on all that gold, after gettin' this far, eh?" He grinned cheerfully at his little joke.

"Well, sir, looked to me like I was up against it. I saw this yeller-haired feller, and his wagon. Idea hit me, and I backed off from it like it'd been a club. Yes sir, I didn't cotton to that notion none a-tall! Same sort of a wagon. Why couldn't we

use the one to fix up the other'n, and mebby travel together? That's what popped into my head, and made me so doggone mad I like to bit myself."

HE SMILED apologetically, went on.

"Mebby I'm doin' him an injustice. Not meanin' to, if he's a friend o' your'n—"

"He's not," Allerton said shortly.

"That so? Thought you looked like a sensible sort. Relieves my mind c'nsiderable. For I plumb didn't like his looks. Made me nervous to think of pardnerin' up with him, but beggars can't be choosers. Nope. So I swallered my pride and hunted him up, and put the notion up to him. Never was so tickled in my life as when he turned me down."

"But you seem to have his wagon," Allerton pointed out.

"Yep, I do, for a fact. Tell you how 't was, too. He'd been circulatin' around the camps hereabouts for better'n a day, tryin' to get fixed up. Seems he'd run into somebody that had offered him a job, and he'd took it. Drivin' a wagon for somebody else. So he turned me down, like I said, but offered to sell me his'n, for not too much more'n what it was worth. Like I say, beggars can't be choosers, and I was that tickled to get it and not him along with the deal, we made a dicker, and that's how come I'm here and he ain't."

He nodded, wiped the sweat from his face with a swipe of his sleeve.

"If so be as you'd like to see him ag'in, which ain't likely, he's not far off. Saw him around last night. Cal'clate he's crossin' the river up above here this mornin'."

"Thanks for the information," Allerton agreed. "And good luck to you."

"The same to yourself, friend, and to your missus. Mebby we'll all be needin' plenty, 'fore we get across. Looks to me like our bright start of the day was peterin' out. Bet it'll make up to storm pretty sudden."

They drove on, Vivian blushing rosily at the other man's rather natural mistake. Today she was riding with Allerton and Hunt had declared that he could drive his own wagon as far as the crossing. It was another mile up-river yet, and the line of wagons, waiting to cross, was lengthening, as men gazed dubiously at the brown sweep of the flood and hesitated.

For now there was the look of bad weather making up. The sun, so bright and cheerful a little while before, was obscured by a spreading haze. There was no wind, but Allerton knew this country, and things could happen fast when they decided to.

Though it was still early in the season, for this far west along the road, here was a good foretaste of the flood of humanity soon to come. Checked by the river, as the timid ones or those with bad luck always were for a time, the line was beginning to pile up on itself, to look like a lot of people. And up ahead, apparently, there had been some sort of trouble, already this morning—trouble which was sending a ripple of apprehension back through the stretching line.

They went on, swinging around some wagons, getting closer, as Allerton's big freight wagons were doing. Hunt kept just behind them. Here was the river itself, looking worse than from a distance. Allerton dismounted, approached a little knot of men.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

A head lifted, turned, and he was looking into the face of Locke. The big man stared with tightening jaw, but after a moment, seeing Vivian, he nodded with a surly grace.

"Couple men just drowned," he explained. "They just pulled them out, down there a way."

THE NEWLY-DROWNED men were being carried back, dripping and lax. He had seen plenty of dead men along this hungry road before now, but the sight still had a shocking unpleasantness to it.

Allerton saw Vivian's quick look, saw her mouth tighten and her eyes mist, then she turned her head away.

Another man swaggered forward to have a better look, with as little compunction as though gazing at newly caught fish.

"How'd it happen?" he asked, while a big, brindle hound at his heels sniffed until a bearded man kicked it away.

"They'd fixed up a ferry an' rope to pull it," a little man with a tired look said briefly. "The rope busted. Raft slewed around, wagon went off, on top of 'em. Their wives had just got across."

And there, in a few words, Allerton reflected, was the history and tragedy of this whole bleak trail. Good homes left behind, months of grinding toil to get this far toward the promised mecca, and death in the Platte for a final grim period. Men had no right to bring a woman on such a journey—

Then his glance shifted to Vivian who had gone back to take her seat beside Hunt, and who viewed the uneasy barrier ahead with her chin bravely tilted. He turned his attention then to the ferry, built since he had been here, and crude enough. But, if it would work, it could be a big improvement over any other means of crossing, especially with the river as it was today. Somebody had seen another chance to garner gold at hand, instead of in the dim distance ahead, and had worked hard at his idea.

It was just a raft of planks, crudely held together with other planks, and a rope to the far shore, with men and horses there tugging the unwieldy thing across. They had a rope from both sides, and had dragged it back to this side now; the broken rope had been repaired by a man on horseback. Allerton decided that the raft was adequate to its purpose—unless the rope broke again. But it probably offered the best method now, while the water was high.

He turned from the river, and saw Locke's new wagon, rumbling closer to the bank. For a moment he was taken aback, for this was one of Fortune Raine's. So Locke was working for Raine now? But that was not so strainge. Raine was always after good men, and there was little question but what Locke could do the work required.

"Take you folks next, if you like," the manager of the ferry said presently. "After him." He jerked a thumb toward Locke. "Some others aint' quite ready yet. Got chilly feet, I reckon. But it's safe enough."

"We'll be ready," Allerton agreed. The last wagon was just being run ashore on the far side, without mishap. He turned to his own wagon, called for Noble to assist him, and was hard at work when Locke swaggered up.

"What you doing?" he demanded, incredulously. For the canvas top was coming off. "Want to get wet if it rains?—and it looks like it might."

"So it does," Allerton agreed. "But I prefer to have the canvas off, for the trip across. It's a lot safer if the wind comes up."

Locke guffawed uproariously.

"Of all the fool notions, you sure get more'n your share," he said contemptously. "Wastin' all that time an' effort. Besides, there ain't a breath of air stirrin'. I'm ready to go now. Want to come along with me, Vivian?"

He looked at her, half-greedily, half-hopefully, but Vivian shook her head, her lips tight.

"No, thank you," she said. "But good luck to you."

"I got more'n my share of that now," Locke chuckled, seeming, despite his truculence, to be in a better than usual mood today. He drove his wagon on to the raft, unhooked the team, and left them to be driven across with others. Then, on the wagon seat, he waved jauntily back as the rope, dragged down-stream by the current, tauntened, and the raft slid out again.

FOR A MOMENT it jerked crazily in the current, then straightened. The dirty canvas billowed a little in a gentle breeze, and the first part of the crossing was uneventful. The raft continued to jerk and pitch with the pull of the current, but it progressed steadily, headed always a little up-stream. The shore was not

a hundred feet away when it happened.

It struck on both shores at the same time. Allerton heard it coming, a shrieking gust of wind, howling out of the east, striking without warning, as it could do in this country. It was blowing upstream while the current boiled in the opposite direction.

It hit the wagon at almost the same instant. The canvas swelled monstrously, the loose ends flapping, and Locke, spurred to belated activity, was trying desperately to close the flaps and tie them together. But what he could do was of little avail against the surging strength of the wind. The big wagon seemed to lift, teeter. Then, slowly, majestically, it heeled over, slid, and was broadside in the water, being sucked down and under, the puffing canvas abruptly deflating again.

Beside him, Vivian's fingers tightened spasmodically on Allerton's arm. On the far shore, men, puny figures from here, were running, working frantically to try and effect a rescue. The wind was a howling gale, but the raft was bobbing on the surface again, unharmed. Had it not been for the big canvas top, there would have been no trouble.

Excitment continued until the raft was finally back to where they waited again, another man riding it. And by now, freakish as it was, the wind had mostly died away. The man on the raft stepped ashore, shaking his head angrily.

"Durned fool, should have known enough to take the canvas off," he protested. "I sent word about that, early this mornin'. But I come over myself to see that the rest of 'em do it." He looked at Allerton's wagons, nodded grudgingly. "I see you folks got some sense. Why, dang me, it's Bob Allerton himse'f. How are you, Bob? Didn't notice you right at first."

"Glad to see you, Jack," Allerton agreed, and introduced Jack Hanley "Looks like you got a good business here."

"The way things are happenin' this morning, it ain't too good," Hanley protested. "But that ain't the fault of the ferry. Wind did it that time. And when the rope busted before, do you know why? An axe fell off that other wagon—tumbled ten feet, and sharp's a razor. Rope was taut, and it slicked it almost in two then it busted, of course." He snorted disgustedly. "Some folks never learn anything, leavin' stuff around that way. There'll be no trouble for you folks, takin' half-way sensible precautions."

Vivian came readily as the wagon was eased on to the raft. Then she asked Jack Hanley a question.

"What happened—to him?" she asked. "On the last wagon?"

Hanley shook his head.

"Got tangled under that wet canvas," he explained. "We fished him out, but he was deader'n a door nail!"

CHAPTER XII

HUNT, VIVIAN and Allerton were all three on the seat of Allerton's big wagon. He preferred to go with them, to see to it if he could, that they got safely across. Vivian's face was white, and she stared straight ahead, but it was not from fear of the crossing. The death of Locke, coming in such a fashion, was a bad shock to her, of course.

They were in mid-stream when the wind hit them again, shoving them around as though the raft had been a toy, the heavy tow-rope only a string. But it held, the weight of the wagon kept it firm-planted on the raft, and a few minutes later they were safely on the far shore, fully a hundred yards farther up the bank than the water-line had been when Allerton had last been there.

The workers on this side, at the risk of their lives, had gotten Locke out, as Hanley had said. He was still where they had dragged him, soaked, limp and bedraggled. But attention, for the moment, had shifted from him, and sympathy, which at first had run strongly for him among the score or more of people now gathered on this north bank of the river,

was running out like wheat spilling from a torn sack. A new discovery had just been made.

The big wagon itself was a plaything of the flood, somewhere far down stream, and it would never, in all liklihood, be recovered. But there was one universal law of the great road, which everyone observed save at times of terror or stress, when the actions of man became unaccountable. That rule was, in the face of disaster, for all to turn in and help the unfortunate, to rescue men and goods alike when it could be done.

That rule had been faithfully followed here. The drowned men of the two mishaps had been brought to shore, and now, a quarter of a mile downstream, two men, riding cayuses and risking their lives to do so, had succeeded in bringing out a couple of packs of goods from the wrecked wagon, where they had floated free.

These had been brought back to the road, untied, and spread out to dry. Up to then, everything save the accidents themselves had been routine. But now a new element had injected itself.

Allerton had seen excitment before, had heard the undertones of fury in men's voices often enough to recognize it now. But he was unprepared for what happened next. One man left the little, excited knot gathered about the opened packs, crossed to where Locke lay sprawled, and spat. A second man drew back his boot and kicked the dead man.

"Dirty skunk!" someone growled.

"Here, here, what's the trouble?" Allerton demanded. He had never had any use for Locke, alive. But, aside from Indians and an occasional renegade, he had never seen such disrespect shown to a dead man before.

"Plenty!" the man who had administered the kick growled. "Here I was wastin' pity on him a little while ago, for gettin' drowned that a way. But he was damn lucky to die so easy! If he'd lived, he wouldn't have fared so good! Take a look!"

ALLERTON did so, where the stuff had been spread out. It was being eagerly examined by some of the crowd, including one white-haired woman. She looked tired and careworn, but she had a strangely gentle, sweet face. Now, however, tears were streaming down it, and there was a sort of repressed fierceness such as he had seen on the face of a wounded doe, still trying desperately to protect her fawn from the attack of circling coyotes.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Allerton said. There were articles such as might be found in any of a thousand wagons which had embarked on the long trail — a comforter, worked in a patch-work quilt pattern of striking beauty of design, by patient fingers. It was now soaked and spread to dry.

There was a clock, which had apparently been wrapped in the quilt. It had a black imitation marble pillar on either side of the dial, and fancy wrought horse heads in bronze at either end. The glass case was cracked now.

A pair of beaten silver candlesticks lay there—heavy, ornamental things, which would have long since been discarded as useless weight, save for the real value which lay in them. These and many more were spread to view. And then the answer seemed to freeze the blood in his veins.

"Remember that killin', a few days back? Two men murdered, while their crippled nephew saw it happen? Well, this stuff belonged to them!"

There was no question of it, apparently. This woman, with the white hair, had been in that same wagon train, and most of the train was here now. Someone was going for the crippled boy, the witness to that callous killing. But this lady had been an old-time friend of the two families, and she had, she asserted, been a frequent guest in both their houses through the years. She had recognized the quilt when it was spread out, beyond any mistake.

"See that one square?" she asked. "Those red and yellow roses? My

little girl had a dress made of that cloth. I gave a piece of it to Anna Harding, to put in that quilt. I know every piece in it like I used to know my own house."

She was also identifying other articles, including the clock and the candlesticks.

And those things had spilled out of the wagon which Locke had been driving! Several men had seen the wagon, tossed by the current, heave, disgorging the two bundles, before the river had rolled it over and over, out of sight. The men on horseback had kept their eyes on those bundles, had risked their lives to get them back. There could be no doubt about the facts.

Now the crippled boy was coming, and others, to add their own voices to the identification. The widows, for whom Fortune Raine had led in taking up a collection a few days before, were not with these other wagons now. But their identification was not needed.

FOR THE REST of the day, little else was discussed along the road. It would be a live topic of conversation for weeks, Allerton knew. Coupled with the rage which men felt, was a feeling of relief that the killer had met his own end. The thought of such a fiend, moving unobserved and unknown somewhere along their line of march, had daunted many a man worse than the ordinary tribulations of the trail or even the fear of Indians.

The death of Locke, under such grisly circumstances, affected both Hunt and Vivian, since both of them had known him before.

With his own wagons across, and those of the others who had been going with him, and the stock safely transported and in place again, they moved on another couple of miles to a camping place for the night. They would reach Rainbow by early afternoon of the next day, and he was impatient to be back, to look after business details. Due to sticking with the wagons, he had been gone much longer than he had intended. Now he took his decision.

"I'm going on this evening," he explained to Vivian. "It will only take a little while on horseback. Hunt is doing fine, and there's nothing in between now to bother any one. I'll be there when you folks arrive."

Vivian looked at him, a little strangely he thought, her eyes luminous in the gathering dusk.

"I know," she agreed. "You've stayed with us, just too see that we got along safely, and I know that you've been burning with impatience to get back. It was very good of you."

"I've certainly not regretted it," Allerton assured her, and for a moment he wanted desperately to take her in his arms. "You'll have friends waiting for you," he added. "And glad to see you!"

"I'm loking forward to it," Vivian agreed. Suddenly she spoke, her voice graver than he had ever heard it before. "Mr. Allerton—Bob," she said. "Promise me that you'll be careful—riding alone tonight. And—and all the time."

"Why, of course," he agreed, surprised, and pleased as well. "I'm always careful. But there's nothing to be worried about, along here, and so close to town."

"I hope not," she agreed. "But I'm not so sure. "I've been talking to Lige—and he thinks that somebody wants to kill you."

"Lige is a good fellow, but he has an over-active imagination," Allerton laughed. "Why should anybody want to get rid of me? If you're thinking about Porter, he was caught in mischief, and knew it. But that was different. Still, I'll be careful, to please you."

"Thank you," she agreed. And then, before he quite understood what she intended, she had suddenly put her arms about his neck and drawn his head down to her's. He felt the soft, quick pressure of her lips, then, flushing scarlet, she was turning quickly away.

"That's for good luck—and because you've been so good to me!" she breathed, and was gone.

ALLERTON stood, for a long moment, almost reverently, and lifted a tentative hand to his own mouth. Then he turned went to his horse, and rode out of the now sleeping camp.

A quarter of an hour ago, he had been filled with a fever of impatience, anxious to ride fast for Rainbow. Now he allowed his horse to pick its own pace. His thoughts were far removed from business. That kiss—her concern for him. It could be easily explained, of course, out of gratitude. He had helped her a little, and he had probably saved Hunt's life. And Hunt, to her, stood at least in the place of a brother. Perhaps more than that, whether she realized it or not. There was the rub.

There wasn't the slightest question about how Hunt loved her. To see the devotion in his eyes made Allerton feel vaguely uneasy. For he liked the boy increasingly. He had what it takes, to make a man. A man whom any woman might be proud to love.

As for Vivian's fears in regard to himself—that, of course, was just the reflection of Lige Noble's expressed apprehensions. But now his own doubts came flooding back. Despite the lightness with which he had brushed it aside at the time, he knew that Noble had been right about Porter.

The man had plainly been hired by some one else to cause trouble. That had been at least the third wagon which he had wrecked, in the course of a few weeks. Maybe he had been hired just for that, and not for murder. That attempt might have been the impulse of a moment, when caught in the act of treason to his employer.

Here, the road wound along, not far from the river, vacant tonight. The river itself, its banks wooded and pleasant, with the contour of the land changing, became a stream of magic. The monotonous flatness through which they had come was giving way to rolling hills, and the moon, shining down on the water, seemed very calm and peaceful.

It was lulling, soothing. But years of life in this wild land had taught him to distrust the look of peace. Noisy Indians were seldom dangerous. It was when they crept in stealth that they planned mischief. The rule applied pretty well to all types of danger.

Somewhere, startingly loud, a rifle boomed on the night. But even before he heard it, Allerton heard the sharp whine of the bullet, so close that it buzzed past one ear like a vengeful hornet. Before it could thunder again, he had flung himself from the saddle, was stretched on the ground, while his horse clattered wildly on down the road. As it went, Allerton shifted his position a little, his fingers closing on the grip of his pistol.

CHAPTER XIII

HE LAY, UNMOVING, for the better part of an hour, but nothing happened. He was too far from the last wagon camps for that shot to have been heard, and the killer, whoever he was, was taking no chances. Either he was confident that his bullet had found its mark, or else he had the wariness of a wolf and suspected a trick, and was too smart to venture close for a look.

Presently the little noises of the night, which had been shocked to silence by the boom of the gun, began again, tentatively at first, then resuming with a gusto. Down by the river a frog croaked, another joined in the chorus. A night-bird swooped overhead, gathering in insects invisible to Allerton's eyes. Another bird made a harsh croaking noise to rival the frogs. A rabbit hopped across the road, pausing to cock its ears and wrinkle its nose toward him before going on and out of sight.

Convinced at last that the killer was not coming, Allerton stood up, knocked the dust from his clothes, found his hat and replaced it, and went on. A quarter of a mile down the road and a little to the side he found his horse, grazing peacefully, and here his own caution was redoubled for another possible trick.

But the horse came at his whistle, and nothing happened. He rode with

pistol loose in holster, and took a resolution to equip himself, the next day, with one of those new six-shot revolvers that Colt had started to turning out in increasing numbers. A shipment should be in his own warehouse by now. Such a gun was still rare in this part of the country, but it might be very useful.

For he had been afforded proof, if more had been needed, that Lige Noble's fears, and Vivian's apprehensions, as well as his own guess, were all correct.

Apparently the danger had its center hereabouts, just as he had his own headquarters. He puzzled for a while as to who it might be. A lot of people disliked him, some with reason, but he didn't know of any who hated him that badly. Still, all sorts of characters made Rainbow a sort of headquarters. It was like an oasis along the long trail, the only place for refitting and getting supplies for a long way in either direction. All sorts and conditions of men came to it.

He sighted it presently, a motley collection there near the river. There was the Cabin, built of logs, where Zeke Stout dispensed liquor. There had always been antagonism between the two of them, but it had been in the open, and Zeke was not a man to hire others to do what he was afraid to try himself.

Allerton's own big warehouse, built partly of logs, partly on sod, showed up squarely. Farther down the road, for it could hardly be called a street, since the buildings were set hap-hazard and to no even pattern. was Fortune Raine's building, of adobe construction.

There were a few houses and other buildings, some of logs, some of boards, others of sod or 'dobe. He saw the house where Mary Jensen lived and baked her pies, and her father sat and dreamed in the sun, avoiding as much as possible the frustrated scoldings of his wife, who seldom lifted a hand to help Mary, even with the housework.

Closest at hand was the rough plank workshop of Pete Morley, the smith, and from it a light still glowed, the only one visible in Rainbow. The door stood open, revealing the glow of the forge, where Morley himself, a huge man with a bristling mustache, bulging biceps and a face to scare little children, still labored.

He turned, peering intently, as Allerton's horse stopped, then, as Allerton swung down, Morley came quickly. His huge paw was outstretched, and his face transformed in a quick smile. His voice was gentle and melodious as a child's.

"Bob! I'm glad to see you, man!"

"The same to you, Pete. How goes it?"

"If it's business you mean, 't is pickin' up—too much. When I think of the weary summer I'll have ahead of me, I fair am minded to take to the hills! Otherwise—we've missed you. Raine came in two days ago, with Mary. And this evening—news of what happened at the river this morning. The town has been buzzing with it!"

Allerton had no need to ask what he meant. Such news traveled fast. Now, the blacksmith looked at him sharply from beneath shaggy brows, as he was silent.

"You must have been there yourself, Bob, eh?" he asked.

"I saw it happen," Allerton confessed.

"Aha! And this Locke, now—what did you know about him, if anything?"

"He tried to kill me a few days back, in a fight."

Morley's bushy brows lifted.

"So it was you, Bob, eh? I had heard of a fight, but not who was in it, save that today they mentioned this Locke's name, and spat! A bad, bad business."

"Dirty," Allerton agreed.

"Like yourself, Bob." Morley's shrewd eyes picked him over. "From the looks, you've been wallowin' in the dust of the road—and that is not like you!"

"Somebody took a shot at me," Allerton explained briefly. His friend's eyes lifted again, grew solemn. His voice, so soft and mellow, took on a deeper warmth.

"Man Bob," he said. "I'm rejoiced

that you're alive to tell of it! But it's in my mind that there's a snake stretched along this trail—preyin' on whom it may devour! What just happened to you seems to be proof, and I've been suspicious of it for a long while. There's more deviltry than that. But last night, and twenty miles to the west of here, not far from Dark Canyon, a long wagon was burned, and found smoking today. There was no sign of those who had been with it—but this was where the road starts to swing away from the river, which was still handy. And with quicksands to boot!"

Their glances met understandingly. If Indians had been responsible, the bodies, mutilated but still recognizable, would have been found.

"Ugly business, Pete!"

"Ugly is a mild word for what's happenin' along this trail over half a thousand miles, Bob! And I'm pretty certain—and others think as I do, that—" he lowered his voice instinctively, glancing around at the covering night. "That the thing heads up right here in Rainbow!"

AWAKENING, the things of the darkness seemed like a nightmare. The sun was shining warmly again, the wind and blustery weather of the day before seemed all gone. Rainbow went about its accustomed tasks with a placidity which always endured through the winter and had not yet been seriously disturbed.

Allerton breakfasted, shaved, and went immediately to his office and to work. His clerk, Mr. MacDonald—and he always insisted on the Mister, from every one save his employer—a tall but wizened looking man with graying hair, was quarlous as usual at sight of him.

"Man, but I thocht ye had nae notion of comin' back and givin' a wee bit of thocht to your business," he protested. "For a week and mair I've been lookin' for ye, and nae a sign till noo. Money does nae grow on trees."

"I'm sure that you've looked after things in fine shape, Mac," Allerton laughed, climbing to a stool beside him. "It's comforting to be able to leave things in competent hands."

"Ah noo, Mister Allerton, don't try blandishments!" MacDonald protested, but Allerton knew that he was pleased. "I do my puir best, that I'll no go for to deny, but after all, I'm no the same as yersel'. And there's ill news."

The ill news, it developed, was that two wagons, carrying freight, had mysteriously vanished, some days before. No sign of them had been found, neither of the wagons nor their drivers.

"'T is possible that the drivers were dishonest," MacDonald sighed "But in my own opinion, there's deeviltry afoot!"

Allerton was deeply immersed in business details when he heard a step and looked up, then arose in relief. Mary was smiling at him.

"I thought that of course you would come and say hello," she said, shaking an admonishing finger at him. "But when I saw that you were determined to be ill-mannered, I came to welcome you home, anyway."

"It was very gracious of you," Allerton managed, and felt a construction of his throat at sight of her graciousness and beauty. "I was planning to come around this afternoon. You know how Mr. MacDonald is—and I've been away longer than I planned on."

"I know, and so you're forgiven," she agreed. "But my father was anxious to see, too—and I've some fresh pies—rhubarb that I raised myself! The only rhubarb west of you guess where, I think. And there's not too much of it yet, sir!"

"You tempt me too strongly," Allerton declared, and slipped into his coat. "It's years since I've tasted rhubarb pie!" He followed her out into the sunlight, aware of MacDonald's glance on his back, but knowing that the clerk looked with more approval on this defection from duty, for he was very fond of Mary. "How did you find everything?"

"Very well, sir. With people hungry for more pies! It pays to leave them without any for a few days, I

think. Now what is this that I hear about Locke?"

ALLERTON gave her an account of it, carefully refraining from mentioning Raine in any way. He knew that she had probably heard all the details before, and her interest in Vivian and himself, the fact that Locke had been a rival for Vivian's favor, could explain her absorption now. But he wondered uneasily if she might have heard rumors of more than he was telling.

If so, she did not ask questions, though once or twice it seemed to him that she was on the verge of doing so. Her father, drowsing on the little porch, greeted him warmly, and even Mrs. Jensen unbent enough to be gracious. After all, next to Fortune Raine, Allerton was the most personable young man along a wide length of road, and he knew how to dress and act like a gentleman. Likewise, he was a business man, and she sometimes regretted, audibly, that Mary had not seen fit to show him her favor—since it was so plain to see that his heart was at her feet.

"If it is, Mother, he's never said so," Mary had answered once, a little sharply. "And after all, a lady can't go ahead and marry a man without being asked!"

Mary brought him a juicy, steaming piece of pie, and a cup of cold tea. He was enjoying them when she reentered the room with something over her arm, which he recognized as the bolt of satin which Raine had purchased for her. By now it was beginning to take shape as a dress.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she breathed. And then, abruptly, she added.

"Fortune wants to be married next week, Sunday, Bob. And I suppose there's no reason for putting it off."

Allerton felt a quick stab of dismay, but he managed to hide it under a smile.

"A lot of people will think there is, when they face the prospect of no pies," he said.

"Oh, that? Well, I don't care to make pies all my life, even for appreciative customers. Why don't you and Vivian get married at the same time? I think a double wedding would be a lot of fun."

A little staggered, Allerton was casting about in his mind for an answer, when the door opened and Raine himself came jauntily. At sight of Allerton he stopped short, and for a moment, it seemed to Allerton, there was sheer amazement in his eyes. Then he was coming forward, hand outstretched, exclaiming heartily.

"Why, Bob, you back? I just got in town this minute. Didn't know you'd arrived, of course. Lucky to get here, I guess, from all I hear about your adventures!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAGONS were coming—the wagons which he had left behind the night before—coming a little ahead of schedule.

Mary appeared, and called to him to wait, and then she was beside him, running with the eager abandon of a child, catching up her skirts in one hand so that they would not impede her progress, so that shapely ankles showed beneath. Her hair was flying, too, but she gave no thought to that, and her welcome to Vivian was warm and hearty. And Hunt was clambering down over the big wheel with a step almost sprightly.

Taking Vivian under her wing, Mary escorted her back to her own home, assuring her that she should again know some of the comforts of a roof more substantial than canvas. The whole wagon train planned to stop here for at least a day, to rest and get needed supplies. Pete Morley was busier than ever. Among his customers was the sandy-complected man who had purchased Locke's old wagon and contrived one that would travel, out of two half-wrecked ones. His own improvised job of blacksmithing had not been too satisfactory.

Morley, of course, could fix it right. He was an old hand at the trade, and had worked, for a while, with Robidoux—or Rubidue, as he himself spelled it. Hunt drifted into

the big warehouse, and looked around, and then reminded Allerton of his promise of a job.

"Of course," Allerton agreed. "You can have it. We'll go up to the ranch in a day or so. Just rest up and have a good time till then. You're not too strong yet, you know."

He had supposed that the job was the main thing of Hunt's mind. But he still lingered, and it presently dawned on Allerton that there was something else of which he wanted to talk—some subject on which he was, plainly, a bit ill at ease.

"Easiest way to take a pill," said Allerton, and grinned at him. "Is to swallow it quick. Longer you roll it around in your mind, the worse it tastes."

Hunt returned the grin, not very enthusiastically.

"I guess that's right," he agreed. "I —I was just wonderin' if you knew— with all this getting married and all —about how old Miss Jensen is—or like that."

"Why, I think she's nineteen," Allerton decided, after a moment's thought. "Yes, that must be it."

"I'm nineteen," Hunt blurted. "And Vivian—she's eighteen, just about."

HE STARED, unhappily, at the wall for a moment, then turned and went out into the sunshine. Allerton watched him go, feeling sorry for him. Hunt was just a boy, but he was a man, too. And very much in love, from all the signs. But he was too proud to say more, especially since Vivian and Allerton were known to be engaged.

Allerton's lips curled, bitterly. What a mess things could get into, with only the best of intentions on everyone's part! If Hunt only knew it, his case might not be so bad as it appeared on the surface. And as for himself—

That sort of thinking was unprofitable. Allerton put his mind to his work, but he was absent-minded about it today, and he knew why. He was waiting for Raine to drop in and have a talk, as he nearly always did on days when the two of them happened to be in town together.

Such days were rare enough. Today, there was more reason than ever for such a talk. There was the matter of a partnership, for instance, which Raine had broached, back on the trail. That, and other things—some not so tangible, but in need of settling.

Mary's father wandered down during the afternoon, to tell him that he was expected up to the house for supper. He guessed, rather vaguely, that Raine would be there too. From the way the wimmin folks was flying around, cooking, he had a notion it would be quite an affair. Hadn't seen so much excitment since a skunk got in the hen coop.

There was no invitation for Hunt, who had heard it all, and Allerton was sorry for him. But he could understand, and so could Hunt, whose face betrayed nothing, save by its studied blankness. Sometimes, Allerton reflected, a poker face gave you away as surely as a display of emotion.

He knew that he was in for it himself, and Vivian with him. This thing, which they had thought to pass off casually and let it wear itself out, had gotten beyond their control. He was sure of it when, in the middle of the meal, Mary looked across the table at Raine, and then smiled at Vivian and himself, and asked again if they didn't want to make it a double wedding.

From the color welling in Vivian's cheeks, Allerton knew that Mary had already broached the subject to her. But it was Raine, hearty and gay as ever, who answered.

"That's a grand idea," he declared. "I've been looking around for the last week, and I've had my men doing the same. And to some purpose, too. There's a preacher heading this way, along with a train that ought to reach here just about a day ahead of the date we want. I've already sent word to him that we'll require his services, and since preachers are as scarce as hens teeth, it's too good a chance to miss. Eh, Bob?"

Allerton looked at Vivian. She met his glance, gravely this time, and smiled a little.

"You haven't even given us a

chance to talk it over between ourselves," she reminded them. "And getting married only happens to most people once in a life time. I only want it to happen once, to me. So we're not going to be rushed. We'll talk it over and let you know."

Here was a woman whom any man might be proud of, Allerton thought. If it was only so simple as that. But this business of getting married was serious, as she had pointed out. Not something to be rushed, or gone into lightly. Something for life required a lot of things in common, and love and trust were among the first.

THE DINNER was finally over, and he found himself outside with Vivian, walking under the moon. He led the way toward the river, which here showed a kindlier nature than was the way of the errant and erractic Platte for the most part. Here it flowed deep and still between wooded banks, as though influenced by some of the streams which had joined to form it — the Laramie, Horseshoe Creek, or Box-elder. Though very soon, as those who had followed its whimsies for long miles knew, it would show its true nature, bringing out such traits as were exemplified by Poison Spider Creek or the Bitter Cottonwood.

They walked in silence for a while, then stopped. The moon had risen, and it seemed to float in the deep pool of the river as well as to soar overhead. Flowers were in bloom here, lending a soft fragrance to the air, somewhere a night bird sang softly.

"It's beautiful," Vivian said. "I didn't think, a while back, that there could be anything like this, anywhere in this country. I was wrong."

"You like it, then?" Allerton asked.

She nodded, then looked at him soberly.

"Of course, Bob. But don't misunderstand me. I—I never intended to get you into—into anything like this. Truly I didn't."

"Events seem to have gotten a little out of our hands," he agreed. "But if you don't dislike the idea—we could get them back into our own control again."

"You mean—you're willing to go through with it?"

"I think that's up to you," he said. "I've thought that, all along. But 'willing' is hardly the word."

She was sober then, not looking at him, but at the river. Suddenly she shivered a little, though the night was warm.

"It doesn't seem fair to you," she said. "I don't want to marry you, and then have you think that you were tricked into it. Like Mary, when it's done, I want it to be something which will last. It never would, not if you felt that way."

"I wouldn't," he assured her. "But I don't want you to feel that way, either."

She looked at him then, and her lips parted in a dawning smile. Her eyes met his, and he leaned toward her and took her in his arms. Tonight her lips were soft and tremulous.

"I think," she said presently. "That you will make a very good husband, Bob. I'll try to make you a good wife."

"I'm not worried about that part of it," he said. "Are we to do what they want, then—about making it a double wedding?"

"I haven't got a thing to wear," Vivian sighed. "But Mary is sure that we can get something, somewhere. She's willing to postpone the date for another week or so, if necessary, and her heart seems to be set on it. How about you?"

"That will give me time to get a house fixed up," Allerton agreed. "I've slept on a cot in the back room of my warehouse. That has done very well for a bachelor, who wasn't in town half the time anyway. But it won't do for a married man, of course."

"And especially for the town's leading man," she added. "I can see that we'll both be very busy."

"There's a house that I think I can buy, and if it's fixed up, it will do pretty well—at least until I can get materials freighted in and build something really nice, and worthy of a bride," Allerton agreed thoughtful-

ly. He pointed it out to her, some distance away.

"Raine built it, as well as two or three other houses, before he went into his present business of trading," he explained. 'He sold it, but it's a good house, and I'll find ways to persuade the present owner that he doesn't need it so much as I do."

"Mr. Raine seems very eager for the wedding," Vivian murmured.

"He shows his feelings more than some others—but that doesn't mean that others don't feel as deeply," Allerton murmured, and was a little surprised at the fervor in his own voice. Her answering smile was reward enough.

They had reached the Jensen door again by now, and he saw, with faint surprise, that Mary was inside, busy about something as usual, but that Raine had already gone.

He left Vivian, heard Mary's excited squeal before he was out of earshot, and knew that she had received confirmation that it could be a double wedding. He should, he supposed, feel excited, elated. Some men got drunk, to celebrate such an occasion, some did one thing and some another.

For his own part, he was calm enough. And then it came to him that neither of them had said a word about love. It had been almost a purely matter-of-fact discusison, as much so on Vivian's part as on his own.

CHAPTER XV

PIPE SMOKE, mild and pleasant, drifted to him as he opened his door, and by that same token he knew that Morley had knocked off work at his smithy and was here to visit him. The big man was sitting there in the soft dark, and his voice was soft and gentle as a child's as he arose."

"'T will come as an anti-climax, I've no doubt, after spending the evening with a girl, to find me here," he said. "But I've been wanting a word with you, man Bob."

"And I'm always glad for a visit with you, Pete. You know that."

"I know it, Bob, and the feeling is a warm one about my heart....I'm not here to pry you know. But what's this I hear about you getting married, too, and Mary and Raine, in a double affair?"

"I guess it's true, Pete. Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

"Man Bob, I don't know." Morley smoked for a moment in silence. "From what I see, she's a beautiful woman, though little more than a girl. And sensible, I would judge. But then, you'll understand, I'm your friend, Bob—and I've not been blind, all these long months. Or maybe I have."

Allerton stirred, a little uncomfortably. It seemed as though the blacksmith were echoing his own old thoughts. Now he went on hastily.

"But of course I do congratulate you, Bob—and wish you all the happiness a man is entitled to, which, in your case, I think should be considerable. If I sound twisted, I take it that you know me well enough to know what I mean, and that I mean no offense, ever. But what we were talking about last has been plaguing me, and so I say—what about Mary?"

With another man, Allerton would have answered that question roughly or not at all. Now he was honest.

"I've been asking myself the same question tonight, Pete."

"Aside from yourself — and sometimes women as well as men can make mistakes and discover it later, you'll note—aside from yourself entirely, we all love her, Bob. Every man, woman and child who knows her. If ever there was an angel not yet ascended to heaven, she is one. Is it fitten for an ox and an ass to go yoked together?"

When Allerton made no reply, he spoke more sharply.

"I'd say nothing in the world against any friend of your's, man Bob—for friendship I regard too highly. Here I speak in the abstract. Such a mistake, if made, could wreck her life."

"Just what do you believe?" Allerton demanded, almost roughly.

"Since you ask me straight, Bob, I'll answer the same, and honest. And it's not alone myself or my suspicions, for then I'd give any man the benefit of the doubt, and keep si-

lent. There's Stokes, who runs the trading post west of here, whom you know well. And Lige Noble, to name but two."

HE POUNDED the dottle out of his pipe, set it carefully into a pocket.

"We lack the proof. If we had it, we'd act. But we're almost positive that Raine is not what he seems to be. In short, there's much dirty work afoot along half a thousand miles of trail—and we are at the center of it here! His is also the perfect organization for such."

"That means nothing."

"Of itself, no. But consider his crew. I know three of his men, of old. Stokes knows four. Noble knows two. Which makes nine men. And every one of them wanted by the law, somewhere back in the states—and none wanted for a thing less than a hanging offense. They are the type he hires. Here they go under other names, and with a pious face turned toward the world; with one or two he might be fooled, or possibly with three or four. But with nine, is it possible?"

That was cold logic, and Allerton was a little staggered by it. In addition to the rest which he knew himself, it was damning. Yet still, as he reminded himself, it was only suspicion, when added up.

Morley stood up abruptly, fumbling with his empty pipe, and his voice was soft again.

"We may be wrong," he said, "but we're watching. And we thought that you should know, Bob. Friendship's a sacred thing—but not to be misused. Well, I promised to repair a broken wheel yet tonight, and the hour grows late. Good night."

It was not much trouble to buy the house which he had in mind, the next morning. It was the best house in Rainbow, aside possibly from one which Raine had built and kept for himself, and the one in which the Jensens lived. Its owner had had no thought of selling.

But Allerton did not haggle about price, and it was his within a matter of minutes. He arranged for renovating to start at once, as soon as the other man found new quarters. With that attended to, he made preparations, with a crew of several men, to start north the thirty miles to his ranch, that same afternoon. Hunt would go along.

Driving briskly, they reached the ranch by moonrise. Things were ready for their coming, as he had known would be the case. Here was a big, well-built log house, a barn, corrals, tool sheds. Allerton farmed nearly a thousand acres here, and big Henry Lamaroux and his wife, his three half-grown sons and two daughters, lived here and cared for things the year around.

To Allerton, this was the real homecoming. His warehouse and the center of his trade were of necessity at Rainbow, or on the great road itself. But he had deliberately chosen this place, partly for the beauty of its location, with a wooded hill rising sharply behind the buildings, partly because it offered what he needed in the way of hay and grass. And partly because it was this far distant from the hurry of the trail in summer.

ALLERTON threw himself into the work the next day with more than his usual energy. There were vast fields of wild grass, thigh-high this season, ready to the scythe. It was a joy to swing the blade with rhythmic stroke, to set the pace for the best of them, including big Henry Lamaroux, who liked to boast a little of how good he had been, back in Quebec.

By midday, there was a lot of hay curing in the sun. And by midday too, Allerton admitted ruefully to himself, he had set too hot a pace. He was feeling the effect of it, on this first day of the season, in protesting muscles and a drag which, by night, would be like lead in his veins. The others were showing it, too. Even Big Henry looked wilted.

"We'll take it a little easier this afternoon, boys," he said. "We don't have to get it all done today, you know."

"By gar, Bob, I'm damn glad to hear that," Lamaroux boomed. "I

thought mabby you figure, this the day the worl'd come to an end, and all this work have to be done first."

Allerton laughed with the rest of them, and presently he led the way to the edge of the trees at the hillside, and stretched in the shade for a while. The sun was at its hottest now, and an hour of rest would be more than repaid by the showing for the rest of the day. He was half-dozing when a shout caused him to look up, then he jumped to his feet, surprised and pleased.

Mary and Vivan were just driving up, in a buggy with a fast-stepping team. And happy and excited as two girls just out of school, he saw.

"Surprise," Mary called, jumping nimbly down over the buggy wheel, before any one could reach them to assist. "Vivian wanted to see the farm, Bob, and we thought that you'd all enjoy a picnic." She looked around critically at the new-mown hay. "Judging by the amount you've cut, you've earned a rest."

She was right, at that, Allerton admitted, taking a new look himself. They had cut, in a little more than half the day, what most crews of equal size would consider a good day of work. He helped Vivian down, holding her in his arms for a moment, seeing the quick smile and flush mount in her cheeks. But certainly, he reflected, both girls looked and acted happy at the thought of their approaching weddings.

Hunt too, looked suddenly more cheerful, and he was helping Mary unload things from the buggy now—taking out supplies in a seemingly endless amount. There was material here for a picnic for the entire crew—pies, cakes, sandwiches, lemonade. Now Mrs. Lamaroux and her daughters were putting in an appearance as well, bringing more things from the house, showing that the girls had stopped there to spread the word.

And certainly, to be lazy for a while, there in the grateful shade, eating, talking, half-dreaming, no longer trying not to think, was a relaxation. A good thing for all of them.

THE GIRLS started for town the next morning, and the haying went forward. Hunt was not very strong yet, and it was a hard job to keep him from overdoing, since he was intent on really earning his wages. At mid-morning, Allerton found an excuse to send him to the house for something, which would be easier than swinging the scythe. He was hardly out of sight when a man rode up on a lathered horse. This was Miles, one of Allerton's men, who had driven one of the wagons in the train.

He had sent Miles on west, two days before, and he was surprised now to see him back, more especially here at the ranch. Miles saw the question in his face.

"Morley asked me to come and see you, early this morning," he explained. "I'd just got back to town, after ridin' half the night. I'd been west almost to Dark Canyon."

"What happened?" Allerton asked, but he knew that here was more trouble.

"Plenty." Miles shook his head. "More murder. Yesterday evenin', it was. There was a wagon, travelin' all alone. A man, his wife, and baby. And like a plumb tenderfeet, they camped out, way off by themselves. Not a wagon in sight anywhere else. Then this masked killer struck!"

"Go on," Allerton said grimly.

"Seems he shot the man down, without any warnin'. And done it right before the woman's eyes. What he figgered on, I don't know—maybe he planned to kill her too, maybe not. But she had spunk. She grabbed up a gun from somewhere, and took a shot at him. And missed, I guess. So he killed her with the next shot."

"How is all this known, if there was nobody around?" Allerton demanded sharply.

"There was somebody around, though none of them had known about it," Miles explained. "A couple of men from another train had been out huntin'. Wanted to get some venison, I guess. Anyway, they kind of got turned around, and so was out later than they'd figgered to be. They was half a mile away or so, they claim, close enough that they saw it

all. They said that after he shot the woman, the killer saw the baby squallin', and seemed half minded to knock it in the head with his gun-butt. But he didn't. He helped himself to a few things, then went to his horse and got away."

"He got away, you say? Why didn't those hunters stop him?"

Miles smiled sourly.

"They aimed to, they claim. But they was still tenderfeet. Aimed to sneak up on him and grab him, 'fore he knew they was around. Thought they had a straight course to reach him. Trouble was, they dropped into a coulee, sort of a blind pocket. Time they could get out, he was gone. But it was dark by then, and danged if he didn't come back pretty soon, drivin' a wagon, ready to take all the loot he wanted, I guess. Started to, and they grabbed him then."

Allerton expelled a slow breath.

"Who was he?" he asked quietly.

"Said his name was Tyberg. He was drivin' one of Raine's wagons. So they took him back to Rainbow. He's to have a trial tomorrow. Town's stirred up like a hornet's nest with a rock in it. Morley said to get you, fast."

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," Allerton agreed. And his thought was rather strange in his own mind. *This will take the roses out of Mary's cheeks,* now.

CHAPTER XVI

HE SADDLED a horse, and rode with Miles. There were some things in that tale which sounded to him like discrepancies, but he did not mention them aloud. Others would think of them, too, and ask an explanation—but he would not. Not now, at any rate. But it seemed to him entirely possible, since the killer had been on horseback originally, that the man with the wagon, whom the hunters had taken prisoner, might be a different individual altogether.

It was mid-afternoon when they reached Rainbow, and thought it still bubbled from the excitement of the morning's news, it had quieted down somewhat. Allerton went directly to the blacksmith shop, and, once inside, Morley closed the door.

"I'm glad you're here, Bob," he said. "It's an ugly mess."

"Has Raine been questioned?"

"He's not in town, Bob. Nobody knows where he is."

They exchanged glances. But that might mean much, or nothing. Raine was frequently absent for days at a time about his business.

"Has this man—what's his name, Tyberg—talked?"

"Not yet. Some were for stringin' him up to the nearest tree without ceremony, but I persuaded them to wait for you. After all, this is pretty much your town. And people know that you're level-headed, and fair."

"Thanks. But he must have said something?"

"He says it's all a mistake, and that he'll talk at the proper time. Insists that he's not the killer at all. But that's all he will say. Claims he just came along, and saw that something was wrong, that he'd heard shots, and so stopped for a look. And that they jumped him then. He might be tellin' the truth."

It did have a plausible sound. Allerton asked another question.

"How is Mary taking it?"

"She's baking pies."

Allerton smiled a little at that laconic answer. The prisoner, he discovered, was being held in a room in his own warehouse, under guard. He returned to his horse, and moved toward the big stable where his stock were kept. The interior was dim and cool, after the hot sun outside, and he pulled off the saddle, dipped some oats from a covered bin and carried them to the stall. Turning, he found Raine beside him.

RAINE smiled faintly at his look of astonishment, and shook his head.

"I heard the news, a little while ago, as I was coming to town," he said. "And I saw you, headin' this way, so I kept kind of out of sight. I wanted to see you before I had a hornet's nest about my ears."

"I'm glad you're here," Allerton

agreed, and knew that no one else had seen Raine. If they had, there would be a stir by now.

"It sounds like the devil of a thing," Raine said frankly. 'Though I've only heard a garbled report. Can you give me the story straight, Bob?"

Allerton did so, as Miles and Morley had told it to him. Raine listened, showing more gravity than usual, kicking absently at the dirt floor of the stable.

"It's not so bad as I had thought," he commented. "It's more than possible, in fact it's logical, that Tyberg had just come along and stopped, as he claims. That's what you'd expect of any honest man, and what I'd want him to do. If they'd waited to see what he did, then, if he was by some chance guilty, they might have caught him at it. But if they just jumped him—he doesn't sound to me like the killer."

"Nor to me," Allerton confessed. "But I imagine they'll swear that he is."

"Well, if it can be shown that he is, I'll help to hang him," Raine said grimly. "I don't go for that sort of thing. You know that, Bob."

"I should certainly hope so," Allerton agreed. "But there's more to it than this, Fortune. And it's bound to come out at the trial."

"More? How do you mean?"

"There's Locke, for one. You know how he died, the other day. And what was in his baggage?"

Raine's look sharpened. After a moment, he nodded.

"I see what you mean," he said. "That's another mistake I made from the looks, in hiring him. But, damn it," he added irritably. "How can a man know who he's hiring? And how did you find out that he was working for me?"

"He told me so, before he crossed the river. And he was driving one of your wagons, of course."

"And others will remember that—since everybody along the road for a hundred miles will gather here till this is over. Some of them will know and bring it up."

"Exactly. Which makes two brutal killings—with your wagons implicated in both, to some extent."

Raine kicked pettishly at the stall.

"It's a devil's broth," he growled. "But you don't think that I've got anything to do with it, do you, Bob? You've known me as well as any man living, I dare say. You don't think that of me?"

Allerton hesitated. A few days before, appealed to so openly, he would have answered with an instant's hesitation. Now he knew that he was not so sure. There were things, ugly things, not so easily to be downed. Including those murderous attempts on his own life, and the suspicions, not easily aroused, of the soundest men in the community. There was something about Raine which no longer rang quite true to him, despite his desire to believe.

RAINE SAW the hesitation, and something leaped to his own eyes which Allerton had never seen there before. He drew back a step, his face went cold.

"So you do think that of me?" he demanded.

"You're too quick to jump to conclusions, Fortune," Allerton protested. "You know that I'm a bit slow-spoken at times. I was just thinking about the trial, and some of the ways they'll pester you."

Raine was a little mollified, but not much.

"Maybe I'm jumpy about this," he said. "But you didn't answer my question, which shows that you do doubt me. I've got to show myself now, and it will mean a hornet's nest. I'd hoped to have the backing of one man who believed in me. But I can face it—and all of them, damn 'em!"

He turned, strode out the door. Allerton took a quick step, called his name. But Raine went on, his back like a ramrod, not looking back. It was a very good picture of injured dignity. But again, somehow, something was lacking, it was not quite convincing, somewhere.

Raine had been an apt prophet on one thing. Everyone was excited at sight of him, wanting to know where he had been. The suspicion and

even open enmity in the face of many of them could be easily read.

He answered their questions as he had done with Allerton, but briefly, curtly, asking if he was on trial for what someone else had done, saying that, as he understood it, the trial was to come on the following day. No one said anything about Locke, so it was apparent that this was not generally known, as yet. By the next day, though, it was certain to come to light. Having mentioned it to Raine himself, Allerton knew that he would be obligated to bring it up, if no one else did.

He was more than half inclined to believe his friend now, for it was easy to see that Raine was hurt by the distrust and suspicion. But his attitude of half open resentment and defiance was not helping his case any.

Morley, and Zeke Stout, of the Cabin Saloon, had been elected to head a committee in charge of the affair, and they had taken care of the guards posted to see that Tyberg did not escape. That suited Allerton, for he preferred to have nothing to do with that angle of it, directly.

Tyberg was confined in a room of the warehouse, with only one window, high up. A guard stood under that, outdoors, and another was posted in front of the inner door of the room, which in turn led out into the larger storeroom.

Allerton was a little surprised, that neither Mary nor Vivian had shown up during the afternoon, but it was nearly evening before he found time to go to the house. And there, to his bewilderment, he found that neither of them was in town. Mrs. Jensen, however, was taking it very placidly.

"They left again, most as soon as they got back here," she explained. "They heard of somebody out west of here a ways that had some blue silk. And they figured they could maybe buy it, to use for a wedding dress for Vivian. So they started right out to see about it."

That, to her, was quite in the natural order of things. For Mary was resourceful and accustomed to doing things for herself, coming and going pretty much as she pleased. And it was apparent that they had set out before the news had reached town.

HE COULD not sleep in the warehouse, on his accustomed cot, tonight. The house which he had purchased was empty, so he went there, feeling strange. He sat, pondering, aware that it was growing late, but not yet ready to go to bed. A strange unease gripped him, something akin to the instinct he had seen in animals and birds when disaster was on the way, though still giving no outward sign. He had seen them uneasy, seen them flee at such times. Storm, or fire, or something catastrophic had always followed. But they had a sure instinct to guide them, he reminded himself, half-angrily. Probably he was just imagining things, allowing himself to get as nervous as an old woman.

There was a footstep outside, a knock at the door. He opened it, and it was Morley who stood there, with a dim figure behind him. As they came in, and Allerton lit a lamp, he saw that the other man was Stokes, who ran the Indian trading post, some miles west of town. Their faces were very grave.

"We've just learned where Raine was, last night," Morley said, and his voice, though as soft as usual, had a repressed note to it now. "Stokes here, got it from a brave—in that camp off south, where Red Wolf's outfit have been staying for the last month. The brave, by the way, is Walking Bear, Red Wolf's son."

"Come on in, and tell me about it," Allerton said. "And what's this about Raine?"

"He was there—visiting a young squaw?" Stokes explained. "It wouldn't have been so bad, ordinarily. But this girl happened to be the one that Walking Bear was enamored of. Apparen y Raine had been seeing a lot of her for quite a while. So Walking Bear was jealous, and he had been making inquiries about something that he had heard, from another camp of the same tribe of Sioux, off down on the Laramie. About another girl."

"You mean that Raine was involved in that, too?"

"So Walking Bear claims. He had heard of this, but he wanted to be sure. He sent a friend to make inquiries, and he returned to camp early this evening. There was a girl, down there, all right, though this affair was several months ago. But they've found out that it was Raine who was involved, though he went under another name, and they didn't learn who he was for sure until they compared notes with Walking Bear."

"How bad was it?"

"Pretty bad. It seems that Raine promised the brother of this other girl, that he would marry her. But he didn't, of course. So then he promised to pay fifty ponies. Instead, two days after that, her brother disappeared. They only found his body, a couple of days ago. There was a bullet hole in the skull."

ALLERTON listened, sickened by the recital, sweat starting on him at the thought of what it all meant. It was not new, in the history of this land, nor were squaw men particularly frowned upon. But in connection with Raine—and it was last night that Raine had promised to attend the picnic at the ranch, but had been prevented, according to his own story, by business.

"And he was in Red Wolf's camp last night?"

"Yes. With this other girl. Walking Bear did not get this other information until this afternoon, you see. But when he did, and was sure, then he came to tell me," Stokes explained. "He said that he was going to kill Raine on sight. If he did not, the relatives of the other girl, and her brother, would."

"We'd better go find Raine," Allerton said.

"That's what we thought," Morley agreed. "For a lot of reasons. But we wanted you with us."

They stepped outside, Allerton's mind still revolted by these further revelations. The night was very still, with the town, including most of those who now crowded it or camped close about it, deep in sleep. There was nothing to mar the silence, the moonlight was bright against the side of the warehouse. Allerton glanced that way, then looked again. He stopped, and the others followed his glance. Then, saying nothing, they broke into a run.

That one window, high up, had been shuttered and guarded. But now the shutter was open and the window as well

Lying in the grass near the corner of the warehouse face downward, was the man who had been on guard He was the sandy-complected man who had made a swap for Locke's wagon who had been so cheerfully determined to reach California in the long run But he never would A bowie knife protruded from his back, just above the heart.

CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS close on to midnight now, but the body was still warm and limp to the touch. The thing had happened not very long before. Stokes swore softly, under his breath, puffing out his cheeks. Morley looked a little sick and Allerton had a queasy feeling at the pit of his stomach. They went around to the front door of the warehouse and in, not knowing what to expect, fearing the worst.

But the guard here was well enough, though far from alert. He had found himself a chair and tipped it back against the wall, not far from the door which he guarded, and now he was noisily asleep. He choked on a snore as Allerton shook him, and blinked foolishly for a moment. But the door was still locked from this side, and he had heard nor seen nothing. Tyberg, however, was gone.

"He can't have gotten very far," Stokes pointed out.

"Small difference that will make," Morley said disgustedly. "There is little chance of getting him again. Let us see whether his employer has gone with him."

The three of them went to Raine's house, which of late he had been cleaning and fitting up in preparation for his approaching marriage. Morley knocked, and at the second summons there was a stir, a sleepy

protest, then Raine came to the door, blinking querlously. He stiffened at sight of them.

"What's wrong now?" he asked sharply.

"May we come in?" Allerton asked. "It's about Tyberg."

"Why, of course," Raine agreed readily. "Just a second, while I get a light."

He fumbled in the gloom, found a candle, and got it alight. Inside, the room showed disordered, where he had gone to bed, then had been disturbed by their knock. His boots, dusty and sagging a little in their emptiness, were beside a chair. He looked from one to the other of them, questioningly.

"What's happened?" he asked.

They told him, in regard to Tyberg, and he sucked in his breath sharply, shook his head.

"That's bad," he conceded. "I'll dress, and see what I can do. Though he'll be well out of here by now, of course."

Allerton waited with the others, and they said nothing about the Indians. That could wait. Allerton was puzzled, as he considered the thing in his mind. There was a restraint between Raine and himself now, following their clash earlier in the day, but Raine seemed both distressed by what had happened, anxious to help in any way possible.

Raine reached for his boots, tugged them on, and they went out into the night. Raine yawned, pulled off his hat, and ran his fingers through his hair, turned with the old air of goodfellowship to Allerton, grinning a little.

"Everything considered, Bob, I'm damned glad that Mary's out of town right now," he said. "This sort of gets me down. I came home as soon as it got dark, and I've been dead to the world. But I feel as if I hadn't slept for a week."

THAT REMARK, Allerton figured, was probably addressed jointly to all of them, as a sort of alibi that he had not been near the warehouse, and so could have had nothing to do with his employee's escape, or the murder of the guard.

There had been no rain hereabouts for several days, and dust lay heavy in the street, a soft, powdery cushion between their feet, splashing out at the sides, as they stepped in it, puffing up around them. There would be more dust as the summer wore on and the traffic became a continual line, nightmarish to those who plodded always in the lung-choking fog of it. Dust.

That was it! Allerton had seen Raine, for just a moment, and not long before dark, though not to talk to him. But he had noted then that Raine had freshly polished his boots since coming in during the afternoon. They had shone resplendently.

Yet now they were heavy with dust, which had worked deep into the very seams. He had just finished declaring that he had gone straight home and to bed, at darkfall. Which was manifestly a lie.

But Raine, in one sense at least, was a true Westerner. He would never walk when he could ride. Always, unless driving a buggy and team of plunging cayuses, he preferred a saddle with a good pony between his legs. There was something funny about that dust.

As though conjured up by his thought of running ponies, they heard hoofbeats now, and saw shadowy figures looming against the skyline, coming into town from the west. The dust clouded around them, but even at that distance and in the night, all of them were familiar enough with these riders to see that they were Indians. Half a dozen of them, mounted on wiry little Indian ponies. Allerton remembered that Walking Bear had talked with Stokes that evening, and he felt that here was fresh trouble, especially since Indians would not come riding into a white man's town at this hour for any ordinary reason.

The Indians had seen them, too, and now they came up, swung down. One of them, a tall, eagle-beaked man, was Red Wolf, the father of Walking Bear, and the chief.

These Indians were excited. Al-

lerton had guessed as much, judging by the hour of their appearance. But it would take more than Walking Bear had told Stokes to cause this visit. They grunted excitedly at sight of Raine, and one of them half jerked at the tomahawk which he carried at his belt. But the chief stopped him with a gesture, grunted, and addressed himself to Allerton.

THERE WAS a double reason for that. Red Wolf knew Allerton, knew that he was one of the big men, here in Rainbow, and they trusted him. In addition, Allerton understood and spoke Sioux fluently. Stokes was not far behind him in that, but the others knew little if any Indian—again with the possible exception of Raine, who it seemed might know more than he had let on. But he claimed to be slow and halting with the red man's tongue.

Allerton listened, and the night seemed to grow cold around him. It was plain to him that Raine was uneasy, that he guessed more or less of what was being said, but could understand only an occasional word. Stokes was listening, but there was puzzlement on his face. While Morley was frankly in the dark.

"What's it all about, Bob?" he asked. "That affair of the squaw?"

"Partly," Allerton agreed. "But it's worse than that. Let's all go inside, where we can talk. My place here will do."

He led them to it, where he had earlier sought in vain to sleep. His feeling then, of impending trouble, had been right enough, he conceded grimly now. He got a light, and the white men sat on chairs or the edge of the bed. The Indians preferred to squat opposite them, and there was about them the ferocity of caged tigers, a heady rage held in check. If they could keep it so!

At thought of the two big encampments of Indians, the one close, the other only a two-day ride away, and of the mounting resentment in them at this new and greater invasion of their land by the endless white wave rolling out of the east, Allerton shivered. There were lone wagons now, scattered across the miles. Somewhere out west were the two girls, and ice seemed to form in Allerton's stomach. This thing would require careful handling, and however it went, he had as little taste for it as if he had been invited to dine on rattlesnake. Yet there was no dodging responsibility now.

One thing was strongly hopeful. These Indians, angry as they were, had acted fairly. Instead of taking matters into their own hands, they had come to town, willing to test the fairness of white justice first. But if that failed—

'There's something you should know, first," Allerton said, turning to Raine. "Something that Stokes and Morley and I were just discussing, before we found out about that guard. We'd been getting ready to come and talk with you about it. Walking Bear told it to Stokes, early this evening. About two Indian girls —one last night, and the other one in a different camp. And about her brother, who disappeared, and has just been found, with a bullet-hole in his skull. Walking Bear said that you were guilty, and that he was going to kill you on sight."

Raine listened, and his face went pale under its tan. But he kept his composure.

"There's been a mistake somewhere," he protested. "Surely you don't believe such a thing of me?"

Almost the same question that Raine had asked him earlier in the day! And which he had been unable to answer in the negative, even then. Allerton's face did not soften.

"It isn't whether we do or not, Fortune. I'm just telling you what was charged. Even that is pretty obsolete now. Did you understand what Red Wolf was just saying?"

Raine shrugged.

"I don't pal with Indians, whatever they say," he said. "I couldn't make head nor tail of it."

"He claims that, tonight, not much more than an hour ago, you were near the Red Springs, south of here. Walking Bear had told his father, just as he had warned Stokes, that he was going to hunt you down and

kill you on sight. But Red Wolf is a great chief, and a fair man. He is a friend of the white men. He talked to Walking Bear, and persuaded him, he says, not to do anything so rash. But to bring the matter before us, as a court, and see first if white man's justice would work against one of our own."

"And that's what this is all about?" Raine demanded.

"I wish it were," Allerton sighed. "But it's worse than that. Red Wolf says that his son agreed. And then, as each was starting back for camp, from their meeting there at the Red Springs, Red Wolf, who was some distance off by then, out of sight among the trees beyond the springs, says that you suddenly appeared.

"You had left your horse back in the brush at the far side of the springs, he says, and were walking. You saw Walking Bear, and Red Wolf saw you, for the moon was bright. Walking Bear was surprised at your sudden appearance, but he evidently thought that you had come to parley, and he remembered his promise, and made no move. But Red Wolf says that you jerked a revolver and shot Walking Bear down in cold blood. He saw it all."

FOR A moment, Raine sat rigid. He was scared, if Allerton was any judge, and he had a right to be, however much or little of truth there might be in these charges. He was fighting for control, and after a moment he spoke, his voice steady enough.

"Do you believe any such rot?" he asked. "The old chief's eyes must be failing, and according to his own tell, he was a considerable distance away. Otherwise I'd have supposed that he'd have taken a hand then."

"That is what he says. For a moment he was too stunned to move, for he had not expected anything like that. He was there, alone, and weaponless. He says that you ran back to your horse, that he heard you ride away. He returned to camp, after making sure that he could no nothing for Walking Bear, and told these men. Some cared for Walking Bear. These came here."

Raine shook his head.

"The moon and the distance fooled him," he said. "It wasn't me. You all know that I was in town, all evening, in bed and asleep." He looked to Morley and Stokes for confirmation.

"Sounds that way, for a fact," Stokes conceded, but he was plainly puzzled. "Speakin' of eyesight, though, Red Wolf can see farther and better than I can—and I ain't exactly blind."

That was an understatement. Everyone present knew that the trader was one of the best rifle shots on the frontier, and a good part of that was due to his exceptional keenness of eyesight.

"Red Wolf says there is no mistake. That it was you who murdered his son," Allerton replied.

THERE WAS momentary silence. Allerton reviewed the possibilities in his mind. The Red Springs, so called because the soil thereabouts was red, the only red dirt anywhere in that whole stretch of country, was some four miles south and a little west of town.

So it would have been entirely possible, so far as the time element was concerned, for Raine to have ridden out of town after nightfall, and, if he had known something about what Walking Bear had learned, and his intentions, as was entirely possible, then the rest became clear. His spy might have reported that Walking Bear was heading toward the Red Springs for some reason or other. In any case, knowing of the Indian's likely movements, Raine could easily have reached the place and killed him as reported. Then have returned and been in bed as they had found him.

A new thought struck him. Returning in such fasion, it would also have been possible for a man who had just killed, to conceive the idea of freeing his employee, who might grow sullen if held for hanging and so give damaging testimony against his employer. In that case, there would have been both time and opportunity for Raine to have killed the

guard on watch outside, and to have freed Tyberg. For the guard had not been long dead when they had found him.

Raine half came to his feet in a burst of anger. Then he sank back, shaking his head.

"So that's all the trust you have in me, is it, Allerton?" he grated. "And you've pretended to be my friend! Well, at a time like this, a man learns something of who his true friends are!" He looked at the others. "Do you fellows believe this wild story, against my word and what you know, of my being here in town ever since mid-afternoon? Are you going to hold me on such a ridiculous charge?"

"As to what we believe, and what we've got to do, that can be two different things," Stokes said slowly. "Charges have been made, and they've got to be aired. You can see for yourself what would happen—to you and the rest of us, and everybody scattered along the road, if we didn't take any action at all. Red Wolf is a chief, remember."

Raine looked angry and defiant. Stokes went on.

"We were going to try Tyberg tomorrow. He's gone, now, but the crowd will be expecting a hearing on this whole affair. No getting away from that. You'll be given a fair trial, Raine."

Raine looked about, from the impassive faces of the Indians, to the equally grave faces of the others, and his lip curled contemptously.

"A fair trial!" he mocked. "With my so-called friends turning against me, I'm to be sacrificed to the mob to make a roman holiday! Why don't you be honest and admit that you all hate me? How can I get a fair trial, in such a case? You've already condemned me!"

It was Morley who answered that. Morley, the one man in town who had frankly never liked Raine from the first.

"That is not so," he said sternly. "We are taking only the action which any accused man deserves, and should demand, to learn the truth. I shall act as your attorney, if you will let me. Maybe you are guilty, maybe not. But the worse a man's case, and the more friendless he appears, the more vital it is that he be assured of justice. I shall do all in my power to see that you are fairly tried and that you receive justice, be you guilty or innocent."

CHAPTER XVIII

"AND WHO WILL be my judge?" Raine demanded, after a moment. "I used to think that you were fair, Allerton—but I've changed my mind. And with my neck at stake, I prefer someone else."

"So do I," Allerton agreed. "But we'll try and pick a fair jury, and the verdict will be up to them. They can select the judge themselves."

"And any jury will pick you for the judge," Raine growled. "It's a frame-up!"

Allerton, tight-lipped, made no reply. Raine was probably right. On such occasions, when a rough frontier court had been necessary before, he had always been selected to preside. It was a job which he would have preferred to be freed of, but he was the father of Rainbow. And Raine knew that as well as he did.

Allerton turned to the waiting Indians now, and explained what had been decided on. That Raine would be held prisoner, under guard, and would be tried in the morning. They could attend the trial and witness against him, on the same basis as a white man. They nodded, apparently satisfied, then exchanged glances. Red Wolf drew himself up with dignity.

"The crime," he pointed out, "is against my people. My son has been murdered. We leave it to you to judge as to this man's innocence or guilt. But my people are angry. It is not easy, even without this, to hold them in check. The young braves cry out for revenge. If he is found guilty, then we ask that he be given to us for punishment."

It was more an ultimatum than a request. Without waiting for a reply, Red Wolf drew his blanket more closely about his shoulders, turned,

and led the way out into the night The others followed him, and after a few moments there came the receding thud of hoofs in the dust as they returned to their camp to make their report. A little of the consternation on Allerton's face was reflected in the trader's as well.

"What did he say?" Raine demanded hoarsely.

"If you're found guilty, they want you turned over to them to deal with," Stokes said shortly.

Raine paled.

"My God," he exclaimed. "You wouldn't do that! They're devils out of hell! I thought you promised me white man's justice!"

"That's what Red Wolf asked for —and it's a demand," Stokes growled, and Allerton could see that he was sick with the implications. "We ain't agreed, but—hell, what a mess!" he added disgustedly. "Still, if you can prove you're innocent, Raine, why should you be worried?"

Raine made no reply, only shrugged, tight-lipped.

He looked shaken now, sitting there, and it was no wonder. Whatever his courage, he had reason to quake.

For his own part, Allerton was in a scarcely less pleasant position. His would be the final word, the ultimate responsibility. He might try to dodge it, but he knew, as did Raine, that it would come back to him. Even had Raine always been his most bitter enemy, with Mary in no way involved, he would have shrunk from such responsibility.

For, if Raine were found guilty and he aceded to the demand to turn him over to the Indians, then even the whites who clamored for his blood would be revolted. Allerton had witnessed such Indian justice once before, here on these same prairies, having no choice in the matter. He had been only a spectator then, not a judge, and helpless to do anything about it. And the man had richly deserved death for his crime. But the thing was still a rankling nightmare in Allerton's memory.

They had treated that man as they would treat Raine. Flaying him alive, before the eyes of all.

If Raine were guilty, he wanted to die as a white man—by hanging. But if the Indians demanded him, the price of refusing to turn him over would be war—bloody war all along the trail, with tribe after tribe rising up, and not one guilty man alone to pay the price of his crimes, but hundreds—men, women and little children, and all innocent blood.

Refusal would not save Raine. It would only condemn them all.

That was on the one hand. On the other, if he aceded to that demand, giving up the man whom Mary loved and had planned to marry in a little more than a week—what would she think of him? How could he ever face her again?

HE WAS INTERRUPTED by Raine's voice, a little hoarse but steady enough.

"Maybe it's a little irregular, since I suppose you'll be my judge," he said. "But we've been friends in the past, Bob. I wonder if it's asking too much—if I could have a little talk with you now, alone?"

"Of course," Allerton agreed readily. "I don't think anyone will object."

"We'll be outside," Morley nodded, and went out, followed by Stokes. They would, Allerton knew, be on guard on both sides of the house, and Raine knew it, too. He looked at Allerton for a moment, and tried to grin and shrug in the old devil-may-care way, but his face was haggard now, the attempt a pitiful failure. Realizing it, he did not try again.

"Bob," he said. "Maybe I've been unjust, in some of the things I've said. I rather suspect that I have. You know why, don't you?"

"You've been upset," Allerton said.

"Upset?" Raine laughed raggedly. "That's putting it mildly. But that's not been it, where we were concerned. I've been burning up with jealousy, is what's the matter with me."

"Jealousy?" Allerton repeated, puzzled. "What about?"

"For a man of your brains and abil-

ity, Bob, there are times when you're remarkably thick-headed," Raine said impatiently. "I'm not blind. I've known, ever since Mary first came to Rainbow, that you loved her."

"Maybe I did, a little, at first," Allerton agreed cautiously. "But it's you who are being thick-headed. She agreed to marry you, didn't she? So it's you that she loves. And for the matter of that, I'm engaged to Vivian."

"And why did she agree to marry me?" Raine demanded. "Not because she loved me — she never has, you blind idiot. You didn't ask her—in fact, like a damned fool, because you counted me your friend, and had some outmoded notions of chivalry, you simply stood aside while I courted her. And so she agreed to marry me—partly, I guess, because she wanted to get back at you, partly because I maybe swept her off her feet for a little while. But she's always loved you.'

"You must be crazy," Allerton protested.

"Crazy? I wish I were. But I've never been blind, even if you have. I don't think that she ever intended to marry me, when she first agreed to. She just wanted to stir you up. Oh, she's a good woman—they come no finer. But even a good woman resorts to feminine wiles where her heart is involved. And she never took me very seriously, because I didn't take myself very seriously."

"Because you've been involved with other women, you mean?"

Raine reddened.

"You can't hold quicksilver in your hand," he said cryptically. "You're a staid sort, and I wish I were the same — you'll never know what hell it is to have two natures that battle in you, the good wanting to go one way, the other dragging you to hell like a captive in the dust."

His face was gleaming with sweat and he paused to mop at it, then went on.

"What I'm getting at is that she has always loved you. Lately I think she consented to having the wedding soon, because we had been engaged so long, and she wanted to be fair to me. And she grew a little desperate and thought it would be easier if you were no longer free, and could be married off. But there's been a ferment in her lately—I've seen it. And I've been insanely jealous. For it's you she loves. I'm not fooled."

Allerton listened, a little appalled. Could Raine be right? He at least believed that he was. And if so, that threw an entirely new light on some matters. In fact, if Raine were out of the way—

THEN HE checked. If Raine were out of the way, he was still engaged to Vivian—though he knew that with her, it was just a marriage that had been arranged, that she did not love him. It was a tangled mess, somehow. But aside from all that, if Raine died, and in such a frightful manner, with him consenting to it—dying while Mary was still engaged to him—

Then his own guilt, in giving up a man to torment, would be a bar between them which nothing short of death could surmount.

"All right, then you're jealous," he agreed. "Though you've been imagining things, Fortune. Let's forget that now. You're in a tight fix, and for the sake of the friendship that we've had, I'd like to help you, if I could."

"The only way you can do that is to turn your back while I make a run for it."

"I can't do that, and you know it. And it would do no good if I did."

Raine shrugged.

"Oh, I know. The place is guarded—and I'd be shot down like a mad dog. And what good will a trial do? Being innocent doesn't help when everybody thirsts for your blood."

"If you can prove that you're innocent, Fortune, I think the jury will be fair. Prove it beyond a reasonable doubt, and I'll stand by you, regardless of the jury."

"And how about the Indians—and the whites, who are just as bad when they get to mob-fury?"

"Prove it," Allerton said doggedly. "And I'll stand by you. Maybe I won't be able to save you, but I'll do

my best."

Raine's face softened a little.

"I believe you would, Bob," he said. "You're just that sort of a fool. Maybe that's not the word for it. But they've no evidence against me—nobody has, really."

"Red Wolf's testimony is going to be a hard thing to discredit, Fortune."

"Do you mean to say that you'd take an Indian's word against mine, Allerton?"

"The word of one witness will be as good as that of any other, precisely as the jury thinks they are telling the truth, or not. Red Wolf has an excellent reputation. I'm just pointing out facts.'

"Damned unpleasant ones," Raine said sulkily.

"This whole affair is unpleasant. If you want my help, Fortune, you've got to prove your innocence to me. I don't approve of murder—of red men or white, squaws or otherwise. Tell me the truth. If you can prove it, I'll help you. But you've got to trust me, to tell the truth."

Raine studied him a moment, shrugged again.

"Oh, all right," he agreed. "I'll admit that I did have an affair with that squaw that Walking Bear wanted. That admission will lose me any chance with Mary, but I guess I've lost already. In fact, I've always known, deep down, that when it came to the final doing, she would never marry me. That's why I've amused myself a bit. I admit it. But I didn't kill Walking Bear. The thing's ridiculous, on the face of it. I wasn't out of town tonight. You know that."

Allerton shook his head.

"Fortune," he said. "You're lying. This evening, before dark, your boots were fresh polished. Now they're dusty. And in the seams, there is red dust. I didn't tell anyone else. But if you're going to lie to me, I can't help you.'

Raine's face grayed, then reddened with sudden fury. He jumped to his feet.

"Damn you, Allerton," he grated. "I always knew you hated me! But I'll promise you one thing! I'll see to it, some way, no matter what happens, that you never get Mary! If I can't have her, you shan't! I'll drag you down to hell with me, and don't forget it! Get out!"

CHAPTER XIX

IT WAS ALLERTON'S own house that Raine was ordering him out of, but Raine seemed to have forgotten that. Wearily, Allerton went. He had his answer now—all that he had needed. Whatever doubts he had entertained as to Raine's guilt, in any of it, were resolved.

He was a killer, a man without principle. For a while, under that gay and debonair front, he had covered up, hidden his misdeeds, and fooled nearly everybody but Morley. Now there seemed no doubt on any score, and the thing sickened Allerton, filled him with a dull sense of despair as he contemplated what must be his own inescapable role here.

It was Morley, the one man who had always distrusted Raine, who now stood ready to defend him. Allerton nodded to him as he came out, and Morley went in. They did not speak, for words were a futile thing now, clogging in Allerton's throat. A few more hours and it would be day.

Stokes looked at him keenly, sympathy in his face.

"It's a tough spot for a man to find himself in, Allerton," he said. "Go somewhere and get some sleep. Pete and I will keep watch for the rest of the night. You need some sleep, man. Tomorrow will be hard."

It was true enough, and good advice. His brain felt dead with the sudden crushing weight that had descended upon it. There was now no good reason for not sleeping on his old cot in the warehouse. Allerton returned, and threw himself down, fully dressed. This time he slept.

A hand was on his shoulder, shaking him, and Stokes was crying to him to wake up, his voice as hoarse as though the early dawn mists now rising above the river had gotten into his throat.

"It's Raine!" he cried. "He's escaped!"

Still bemused with sleep, Allerton followed him outside, not understanding.

"But how could he?" he demanded. "I thought he was being so well watched—"

"I thought so, too," Stokes agreed bitterly. "I was on one side of the house, and Lige Noble on the other. Morley was in there, talking to him. Now and then, for quite a while, I could hear their voices. Then it came to me that I hadn't heard anything for quite a while, and that Morley had been in there a long time. I went in for a look. Morley was stretched on the floor, and Raine was gone. How, I don't know. I came and called you."

"And Morley?" Allerton was wide awake now. Daylight was spreading, the last scattered remnants of darkness huddling in the low places. The east was a welter of crimson, banners flung out ahead of the marching sun.

"He was alive. That's all I stopped to see."

Morley was just returning to consciousnes when they reached the house, under the ministrations of Lige Noble, who had used the contents of the water bucket generously, then had forced a few drops of whiskey between the blacksmith's lips. There was a swelling on Morley's head, a few drops of dried blood. He sat up and felt gingerly of his head, and looked around dizzily.

"And to think that he could do that to me!" he protested. "Man Bob, I'm fair ashamed of myself."

"How did it happen?" Allerton asked.

"That I do not know. We had been talking, and I must have grown careless, stooping my head, as I recall, to make a note of something he had told me. The next I knew was nothing, as you might say, when he hit me with something—a chair, it might have been."

THE QUESTION of how Raine had escaped was equally baffling, at the moment. Both guards swore that he had not gotten out of the house by any door or window. But this had once been Raine's own house, built by him. If there were secrets connected with it, he would have been the one to know them.

Allerton looked about sharply, and in the next room found it—a trap door, cleverly hidden in the floor, of which he had known nothing. Probably the last owner of the house had not even been aware of its existence. Only the faint dust, disturbed about the edges, revealed it now.

A steep flight of stairs was disclosed as they raised it, leading down into darkness. Then there was a narrow passageway, leading back for half a hundred feet, then up again. Here too, was another door, coming out among a clump of brush and trees, and well concealed from the outside.

"Shows he's been a crook from the day he hit town," Stokes growled. "Plannin' a get-away if things went wrong!"

Full daylight was on them now, and the camps along the river were stirring to activity, though today there would be no traveling. Everyone was looking forward to the trial of Tyberg, as though it had been a holiday. When news of what had transpired during the night spread, there would be plenty of hair-trigger tempers.

Worse than those, however, would be the probable reaction of the Indians. One escape they might understand, and dondone—more especially if the man whom they held the chief grievance against, and who was responsible for all that had happened, was held in place of the one who had gotten away.

But news that Raine too had escaped would not be well received. It was more than likely that they would believe that this thing, happening twice in a single night, was a deliberate collusion between white men.

"And if they think that, there'll be hell to pay!" Morley groaned.

Already, as was inevitable, the news was spreading, running like wild-fire in dry grass. And just as inflammable. Someone came spurring in on a lathered horse.

"The Indians are out!" he cried. "They're on the warpath!"

It was impossible to get coherent information from this man, or from others who soon commenced to straggle in—wagons and single horsemen, a few even on foot, hurrying back from the west. Only one thing was certain. The contagion of fear was among them, and they firmly believed that a thousand marauding redskins were already attacking everything in sight. So far as Allerton could learn, in the next half-hour, nothing had actually happened that anyone had seen.

"Folks can go squawkin' crazy, like a flock of hens when a coyote shows up, and do it just as quick," Lige Noble growled. "Main diff'rence is that it takes somethin' to scare the chickens, and folks can scare their own selves plumb out of what few wits they've got."

THAT MIGHT be a good summary of it, Allerton realized. On the other hand, there might be trouble already, and if not, there almost certainly would be when the full news became known. It was an ominous thing that none of the Indians were coming in to town in anticipation of the trial.

Between trying to listen to stories, and sort some grain of truth out of the excitment, and grabbing a bite of breakfast, it had not been easy. Now, Allerton made up his mind.

"I'm going out and have a look," he said. "Find out what it's all about. I'll see if I can get a clue as to where Raine and his crew are. If there's Indian trouble, it'll smoke them out."

"You're takin' your life in your hands," Morley groaned. "If the Indians are out."

"If they're out, we're all in a tight spot," Allerton pointed out. "They can raise a thousand men in not much over twenty-four hours. We can't muster two hundred. That's one reason why I'm going. I want to find Red Wolf and tell him the truth. He's fair-minded, and maybe I can avert trouble."

"Red Wolf's a pretty level-headed chief," Stokes conceded. "But he was havin' trouble, last night, to control his young bucks. They'll stay tame just so far. After that, they'd as soon lift your scalp as any other piece of hair."

"There's another reason why I'm going," Allerton said. "Don't forget that the girls haven't come in yet!"

Morley's face went gray.

"I'd plumb forgotten, in all the excitment," he confessed. "There's just one good thing. Mary has a level head, and knows how to use it."

"I'll get a bunch of the boys, and we'll ride with you," Noble said.

Allerton shook his head.

"No. If there is trouble, every man that can be gathered is needed, right here. There are forty women and children hereabouts, and there'll be more. And I'll stand a better chance alone, than if a lot of us go."

"'Bout fifty-fifty," Stokes muttered. "And danged slim either way—if trouble has busted."

Allerton went to his warehouse for equipment. If he ran into trouble, a gun wasn't apt to do much good. Still, a good gun gave a man a more comfortable feeling. His hope lay in influencing Red Wolf to give them a chance to make good on what they had promised. But, as Strokes had pointed out, Red Wolf himself could keep control only up to a certain point.

He came out from the warehouse to find that another man had just reached town with something which was tangible. A white man had encountered an Indian, not much more than an hour before. From the description, it seemed likely that the white man was Raine. The Indian had recognized him, had known instantly that he must have escaped, and had planned to kill him. Only he had been too slow. Raine had shot him between the eyes, and escaped.

"And that," Noble added grimly. "Just about does it! You'll likely be wastin' your breath—along with riskin' your neck, Bob!"

"All the more reason for getting started, now," Allerton said tightly. His thoughts were of Mary and of Vivian—God only knew where they might be, or in what peril now. He waved briefly, turned his horse.

THE SUN already held a promise of real summer heat in it as he neared the camp of the Indians. Summer was almost upon them, and within another week, the line of wagons, starting in a slow trickle out of the east, would have become a steady, almost unbroken flow. If trouble was averted until then, it could not come at all. But if it broke now, there would be massacres along a half a thousand miles of road, sporadic attacks all through the summer.

From the distance, he could see a stir in the big camp which was disturbing. He swung quickly at the sound of hoof beats, stared in amazement. It was Hunt who was coming up behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Allerton demanded shortly.

Hunt, though his face showed strain, grinned unexpectedly.

"I heard about Vivian and Mary," he said simply. "And I know you want to find them. So do I."

He might have known, Allerton reflected. His own mind had been full of them. After what Raine had told him, there was a lot to think about, though the more he thought, the more of a headache it became. But regardless of that, his responsibility, for the present, was to both of them, equally.

Hunt made a bad situation only the more complicated. The boy loved Vivian, of course, and so was determined, however foolishly, to try and help.

"I'd send you back," Allerton said shortly. "Only it's too late for that."

"That's why I kept behind you until it was too late," Hunt said simply. "I'm going along."

Allerton warmed to him. Hunt had become a man, there was no doubt of that. A woman might well be proud of him. He was pretty green, but he was willing, and it was pleasant, right now, to have companionship.

"Let me do the talking," he warned. "We're walking on slippery ground."

"I couldn't talk to them, anyway," Hunt pointed out. "I don't savvy their lingo. But if it comes to fightin', I'll be right with you."

It looked to Allerton as though a half of the warriors had already departed, with the others ready to do so at any moment. Some of them were losing no time. Others were delaying long enough to daub themselves with a bit of war piant. Everything testified to the grimness of the occasion.

Ordinarily, Indians did not like to be rushed, especially in a matter so grave as this. They preferred to hold feasts and dances, to be assured that the signs and omens were propitious, to make their preparations at leisure. But events had not happened as anyone had planned, and those that had transpired had a driving urgency behind them.

Almost at once, on being seen, they were surrounded. There was a murmur of talk which was not reassuring. Nothing actively hostile, but they were on the open brink of it, if Allerton knew the signs. He asked boldly for Red Wolf, and took an easier breath on discovering that the chief was still there. If he had been gone, it could have been bad.

"I have heard many things," Allerton said, wasting no words when he faced the chief. For again this was a situation where the forms and ceremonies must be ignored. "They tell me that Raine murdered one of your men this morning. I cannot offer excuses for his escape. But I would tell you this. The hand of every white man, outside his own crew, is against him. To kill him, and them, whenever and whereever we can find them."

RED WOLF nodded gravely.

"Of that, I was sure," he agreed. "He who murders white men and red alike is renegade. There is other news. Pawnees have swept down upon us in the night. The hills around Dark Canyon swarm with them." His stern face split for an instant into almost a delighted grin.

"I do not think that the renegades know of them. Pawnee and Sioux will clash. But the renegades too will head for Dark Canyon—not suspecting that the Pawnee waits there, or what will happen. My own men are already on the way.'

Listening, Allerton drew a breath of relief. The Sioux and Pawnees

were ancient enemies. This almost fortutious raid of a Pawnee war party, aimed against the Sioux, was a sheer stroke of luck. It gave a vent to the mounting passions of the Sioux, an outlet away from the whites. With the chance to perhaps find and kill some renegade whites as well, and all without calling down upon themselves the wrath of the Great White Father in Washington.

That was all to the good. But the next instant elation was washed away in realization. In such a clash as was now imminent, with whites mixed in, fighting recklessly against any Indian they saw, the Pawnees would be driven to desperation, to battling white and Sioux alike in turn. And somewhere out there, where the battle was sure to join, were Mary and Vivian. They would be in equal danger from renegades and Pawnee alike.

CHAPTER XX

THE SUN WAS well past its zenith now, and the heat which Allerton had forseen earlier in the day was upon the land. Here was the pass, but even the trees which grew raggedly in these hills seemed to droop and quiver in the pitiless heat.

For most of the day, he and Hunt had traveled alone, pushing the horses to the limit of what they could stand and keep going.

For a long while now, Allerton had had no single glimpse of Indians. It was almost as though this had become a deserted land. Yet he knew that Red Wolf's warriors were prowling through these hills, doubly alert now, on the hunt alike for Pawnees or any of Raine's crew.

Hunt spoke, breaking a long silence.

"What if some of the Sioux mistake us for some of the renegades?" he asked.

"We'll just have to watch our step and hope for the best," Allerton said. "And I think we'd do better now to leave our horses and go afoot."

They left their horses hidden in the depths of a wooded draw, though that was no assurance that they would be there when they returned. Allerton led the way then, using all the caution and woodcraft which he knew, the same subtle stealth of the Indians who were keeping so completely out of sight. There was enough cover here to do it. Patches of brush, clumps of trees, stones like protruding thumbs. With the broken landscape to help. And here at last they were in Dark Canyon itself.

IT WAS NARROWING now as they neared the crest, deepening, the high sides shutting away the sun. Down in here, save at certain angles and for brief minutes of the day, the sun never shone. The rising walls shut it away, and up above they seemed at times to lean together, as though about to close the gap entirely. This was partly an illusion from trees near the top, partly a trick of the eyesight. But it added to the impression that this was a trap.

Allerton had that feeling, increasingly. So far, there had been no clash here—at least none in the open. If stalking warrior had met other warrior, the thing which followed had been done in silence and with despatch, so that no others had heard.

That was the ominous thing about it. Somewhere back in this country were the Pawnees, and hunting them were the Sioux. And back in here as well, from every sign, must be Raine and his crew. It was inevitable, under the circumstances, that they head this way, since there was no other way to go with the hue and cry raised against them.

The feel of danger was so strong now that Allerton could almost taste it. This was the crest, though they were deep inside the mountain, here in the canyon. It was a couple of hundred feet wide here, but trees, boulders scattered hap-hazardly, and other debris filled most of it, so that there was only the wagon road where a man could travel with any ease. Today, no one did. Any others who lurked hereabouts kept to the brush, as they were doing.

Here, with a mighty gurgling and splashing, the creek which he had once described to Vivian broke, full-

fledged, out of the hillside, and plunged along. It was clear, cold water, a Godsend to the migrants. But it seemed to partake of the devious nature of the canyon itself. It ran for a hundred yards in the open, swift and dark. Then it vanished as it had come, sucking down into a dark hole in the wall, almost filling the opening as it vanished.

SOMETHING tightened in his throat as he remembered telling Vivian of this, and of how it reappeared again, half a mile farther down the canyon. This thing of finding no sign was dark and chilling in itself. And then they both saw it.

It was mossy here, beside the water, a spongy turf which would soon smooth out any indentations made, leaving no betraying sign. But now it was there—the shapely print of a woman's shoe. And, not far at the side, the less distinct print of another, this one of a slightly different size.

Hunt looked at him, wordlessly, and Allerton signed him to silence. His heart was thudding as he studied the sign. Two women—trying to move and leave as little sign behind as was possible. They too, had kept to the brush and trees, until forced to cross the creek here. They must even now be somewhere in that tangle of brush and trees ahead, lurking close to the sheerly rising canyon wall.

That sign was fresh. Not more than a quarter of an hour old, Allerton believed. And who would make such sign, save Vivian and Mary?

By calling, the girls could probably hear them. But this was a time and place for silence. The very fact that there had been no open warfare yet, was proof that the warring factions were haunting this place like ghosts.

He could pretty well get the picture now. Mary and Vivian had been caught somewhere hereabouts by the outbreak of trouble. In a situation which would throw most people into head-long panic, Mary would take it coolly, and Vivian was one to keep her head and following such leadership as well. How much they knew of the true situation, with three opposing factions, was doubtful. But they knew that this was a bad spot to be in.

Faced with that, they had kept their heads. And so far, apparently, they had succeeded in keeping out of sight, and free. Though it was likely that enemies prowled even now on their trail.

Allerton led the way again, every nerve on the stretch. His eyes were searching the brush to the side when he felt Hunt's fingers on his arm, the excitement of the boy trembling through them. He looked, and could hardly restrain the impulse to shout.

Two hundred feet ahead, just moving through a small opening between trees, was Vivian. It was only a glimpse, but there could be no mistake. Hunt's lips were at his ear.

"Mary was ahead, leading the way."

Allerton nodded. Then, since they were so close, he cast aside a lot of caution and moved swiftly. They reached the spot where they had seen them, then stopped, baffled.

FROM HERE there was open ground ahead. The creek made its sudden exit again, diving back into the canyon wall, sucking, gurgling. To cross the open to more cover up ahead would be so hazardous that he doubted if the girls would try it. He had been sure of finding them hiding hereabouts, still studying the situation. But there was no sign of them.

To go ahead, into the open, was to invite disaster, even though it would require less than a minute to reach cover again. But there would be unseen eyes which watched this spot, of that he was sure. They might be Sioux, and friendly. But they might be Pawnee or renegade.

Yet he had to know. Cautioning Hunt to remain back out of sight, Allerton advanced. Now he could see sign where the girls had gone, a dim trail. It paralled the edge of the water, ending abruptly, instead of going on as he had expected it to.

He stopped where the sign end, baffled. They could have stopped into the water, but it was impossible

to follow the creek, for it ended here as well, plunging into the hill. Spray was flung back where the scurrying water struck the rocky portals of the tunnel, making the ground mossy, soft. There was no more sign.

Then he saw wetness, back on shore where the splash of the spray did not reach. The thing which it suggested was startling, but not to be denied. Allerton took a deep breath, stepped into the water, straight ahead into where the stream sucked back into the hill and was lost in blackness.

If he was wrong, he was risking his life. Once in the sucking grip of that water, and would carry him along into the bowels of the earth. But there was nowhere else that they could have gone—and that wetness, back where the ground should have been dry—

His head popped up into air, and he knew that he was right. Just inside the hill, the water grew less turbulent, more shallow, widening out. And somewhere on ahead, where normanny there would have been only solid opaque blackness, was the faint gleam of torchlight!

Of one thing he was positive. Mary had not known of this, any more than he had, and Vivian could not possibly have suspected it. This, then, must be the hide-out of the renegades. Sometime in the past, perhaps faced with peril and taking a desperate chance, or when the water was low and deliberately seeking for an almost perfect hide-out, Raine or one of his men had ventured in here.

They had found that, back inside, the cavern-like course of the stream widened, so that there was dry rock at one side of the darkly coursing water. How far this went, he had no way of telling. But it required only two or three quick and fairly easy steps, through the shielding wall of water, and then, in here, it was an almost perfect hiding-place.

It was apparent that Raine and his men had holed up back in here. Also that they had been on the watch, to see who came and went outside. Probably they had watched the progress of the girls for some time.

And when they had reached this spot, Raine had acted. One or two men had moved swiftly out, across to where the girls stood, as the wet dirt had testified. They had grabbed the startled women before they could cry out, carried them back in here.

That much was easy to figure out, for it could have happened in no other way. Indians would never venture into such a place as this, because of its evil traditions. So he could be reasonably sure of that much.

It might mean safety for the girls, if no prowling Indian had been watching at the right moment to see what had happened, or to see him go this way, either. Safety for the moment, in so far as Pawnee was concerned.

But there were worse things than Pawnees, who, after all, had come to war only on their enemies the Sioux. To be in the hands of the renegades, outlawed now, and with Raine in his present mood—Allerton's jaw clamped. If there was any jump from frying pan to fire, this had all the look of it.

Then, up ahead, by the flaring torch, which was stuck into a crevice in the rocky wall, he saw them. And heard Raine's ready laugh, easy and care-free as always. Cautiously, he moved ahead.

CHAPTER XXI

ALLERTON had once told Vivian that he was a careful man. Before taking the plunge into the water, he had wrapped his gun in his coat, holding it tightly. He had been soaked, but the weapon had been pretty well protected. He believed that it would still work, in emergency. He hoped so.

There was a sound behind him, and he spun about, then stopped. It was Hunt, who had followed him in. After a moment, not saying anything, they went forward again.

Now he could see the girls plainly, standing there, their hair soaked and stringy, their sodden dresses clinging to them. There was a small fire of dry driftwood blazing, and they crouched over this, eager for its heat.

Raine was speaking to them, trying to sound reassuring.

"There's nothing to worry about. Not a thing in the world. The Indians won't find us in here. And my crew are back in here, too—farther down the stream, right now, but thirty good fighting men, if it comes to trouble."

Mary looked at him, there in the unearthly glow of the flames. Her voice was flat.

"What if they find us and trap us in here?"

"They can't," Raine chuckled. He appeared to be in high good humor now. "The funny thing is that you can follow this creek, right to where it breaks out into the open again, and get out all right. It saved my life nearly a year ago. So if they find and watch this entrance, we'll just go out the other."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"I've made it my business to know. Nothing like being prepared for whatever comes up."

"Such as murder and robbery?"

Raine looked at her sharply.

"Surely you don't believe that of me, Mary?"

"You fooled me for a long time," she said, and her voice held a note of bitterness. "But there comes an end to all things, you know. What are you going to do with us?"

"Get some more wood for this fire," Raine retorted promptly. "You're both shivering. I'll be right back."

He turned, following down along the course of the stygian creek. Allerton made up his mind. It might be safer, back in here, than outside, in so far as the Pawnees were concerned, but even that was doubtful. There was no question in his mind now but what Raine had watched the approach of the girls for some time, had planned this thing deliberately. They would be valueable as hostages, if it came to a show-down with the forces against him, and the man was without scruple.

Mary turned as he was beside her, and there was surprise in her eyes, which was echoed in Vivian's. And then in her's came a gladness which put a frenzy in his blood. Hunt was beside them, and Allerton spoke quickly.

"Get back outside, the three of you. Hurry!"

Hunt seemed about to demur, and there was momentary hesitation in Mary's face. But at what she saw in his own, she took Vivian's arm and led the way, and Hunt went with them. Allerton moved back a few paces, to the edge of the shadows. The gurgle of the water hid all lesser sounds. Raine was already coming back, carrying an armful of wood.

He tossed it down, and placed several of the sticks on the fire, so that it blazed higher again. Only then did suspicion come to him, and he looked about, peering toward the darkness beyond.

"Better come and get warm," he called. And then there was an abrupt change in him. Plainly he had not considered that they would try to escape, the way they had come. But now he started forward, almost running. Allerton spoke from the gloom.

"Too late, Fortune. They're outside again by now."

RAINE halted, with the jerky motion of a run-down toy. He stood, straining his eyes against the shadows, and when he spoke, he had his voice under control.

"I'm glad that you're here, Bob. I've been regretting the necessity for going off so suddenly, last night, without seeing you again. While there was still unfinished business between us."

"Some things have to be settled," Allerton agreed wearily. "But I never thought it would come to this between us, Fortune."

"I always knew it would," Raine said shortly. "You always rub me the wrong way. My men are on down a little way, and I could call them. But this is just between the two of us."

"Just as you like," Allerton nodded. "But you know, I suppose, that the Indians are after you."

"I'm not a fool. But they'll never find me, in here. I'm sorry that I can't waste more time, but this is too good a hideout to have wasted. I'll

have to get the girls back, though they've little enough chance of getting away. Still, that's the way it is."

Allerton had been watching him alertly. Now Raine moved for his gun, and this was the moment. Allerton knew that Raine had seen him, had accustomed his eyes to the gloom. His own draw was as fast and smooth, and the two weapons seemed to lance flame almost together, the sound setting up a curious coughing echo in the cavern-like tunnel.

His own shot had missed, Allerton knew, just as he knew why. At the last moment he had been unable to bring himself to kill Raine, without giving him one last chance. There was no doubt in his mind now as to Raine's guilt, in any of the things charged against him. But the two of them had been friends. More than once they had slept under the same blanket, had ridden together days and nights on end. Long since, before Mary Jensen had come to Rainbow, Raine had saved his life.

Those things were not easily forgotten. That, perhaps, was his weakness. For Raine suffered from no such compunctions. His own bullet had found its target—not quite as he intended, perhaps, but the sharp stab of it through the flesh of his left arm twisted Allerton half around. He felt the hot blood gush, and knew that only the flesh was torn, but the shock was like the blow of a club.

Silence came down again as the echoes of the shots merged in the dark chuckling of the stream. Both of them were waiting, and then Raine spoke again, and this time, his voice was no longer level, nor light and bantering. Some of the rage, the long pent-up hatred in the man, was coming to fore, an inherent savagery which had driven him like a goad. With it was a sort of mocking triumph.

"I've got a six-gun, Allerton," he said. "And in just a moment now I'm going to kill you. That's the advantage of a six-gun over a pistol. Six shots to one. You've had a long streak of the devil's own luck. I hired Porter to kill you, and you got him instead. I tried it myself, when you were heading back for Rainbow, and I thought I had you then. But you've lived to plague me, to turn Mary against me. There's an end to any string, though, and this is it."

HE WAS speaking more truly than he knew. As the gun in his hand started to lift again, Allerton fired. This time, because he had no choice, he did not miss. He saw the look of shock, of amazement, which overspread Raine's face for a moment before he fell. And then, because he was a methodical man, and enemies lurked both outside and within this cavern, Allerton punched out the empty shells and inserted fresh ones, wincing with the effort of using his wounded arm. But a six-gun, as Raine had said, had advantages over the old single-shot pistol. That had been in his mind when he had equipped himself with it, back at Rainbow.

By now he could hear the others of Raine's crew coming, having heard the shooting. He hesitated a moment, a little wearily. A matter like this of the last hours had a way of brushing aside conventions as though they had been cobwebs, of clearing misunderstandings. Of preventing, perhaps, mistakes which in other times would take deeper root in a barren soil.

So now, of course, Vivian and Hunt were together, and that was probably the way it should be. And Raine had insisted that it was he whom Mary had loved, always. The thing which he had once not dared to believe. And now, with realization within his grasp, he found that, deep down, there had been reason for his own hesitation. He had never wanted it so.

But with Raine gone, if that was what she wanted, it was what he would owe to her. He had planned what he had supposed would be pretence, being resolved to do his best. If he had to, he could still pretend.

Covering his gun again against the wetness, Allerton went back, plunging through the curtain of water and out, across the creek, in to the open.

Daylight smote his eyes blindingly,

and then he saw the three of them—Hunt and Mary and Vivian, standing there, out in the open. With them was Red Wolf, and perhaps a score of his warriors, also in the open.

Red Wolf turned, and looked at him, and at his bloody sleeve. Vivian too, was looking, her face suddenly bloodless. Allerton nodded toward the cavern.

"I didn't have any choice, Red Wolf," he said. "But his crew are in there now. They'll be trying to get out at the far end, I suppose."

The chief's face smoothed out a little, almost to a grin.

"You were clever, to find his hole," he said. "We will make a move to enter, to frighten them into running. The Pawnees are at the other end, and for once, they may serve a useful purpose."

IT MIGHT have been imagination, almost, that he had been talking to the chief, that Red Wolf had been there with his warriors in the open. Almost as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone again, and the canyon seemed deserted save for the four of them. Vivian looked at him, and then she was beside him, exclaiming, turning her back briefly to tear off a strip of sodden petticoat, then back again to whip it about his arm.

"Bob," she said, quite needlessly. "You're hurt!"

"Am I?" he asked. "I'd almost forgotten." For he was looking toward where Mary and Hunt walked, a little shyly, yet oblivious of the rest of the world. "I—I thought—that you and he—"

Vivian's smile was serene.

"He and I have been like brother and sister," she said. "And after all, he has known Mary as long as you've known me. So is it so strange?"

Perhaps, it wasn't, with some things cleared up. It had been Mary that Hunt had inquired about, asking her age and all.

Raine had sensed the change in her, without understanding it. His jealousy had flamed against Allerton, unable to see a rival in a clumsy-appearing boy who had been at the gates of death. But love, as Allerton was suddenly discovering for himself, was a thing beyond the dimensions of rationalism, something neither to be measured nor held in a leash. Something as wonderful as the light in a woman's eyes, as rich and full and sweet as the promise in lips now raised to his.

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Double-Action Western published bi-monthly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1946

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Double-Action Western and that the following is to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1946. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) (SEAL)

Man In Buckskin

A Fact Article By BRETT AUSTIN

THE GRAVE OF Ed Rose lies near the mouth of Milk River in northern Montana. Here the Milk empties into the silt-laden Missouri River. A hundred years ago, when the Northwest was peopled by trappers and Indians, the name of Ed Rose was admired by some buckskin men and cursed by others.

Rose's veins carried the blood of three races: White, Negro and Cherokee. Perhaps the combination of these three bloods created in him the desire to explore and to travel. For when only a youth he became a member of that adventurous group of trappers who paced the advance of civilization into the Rockies, the Ashley Men.

These men of high hopes and long guns faced the elements and the savages in order to take the peltry from the high rivers of the Missouri, the Milk, and the Wind. Ed Rose was one of their most fearless wilderness men. Short, wearing beaded buckskin, he went into Indian camps, lived with the savages. He became a squawman, as did many other trappers in that period.

That fact that a White man married a squaw was nothing new in those times, for White women were scarce. Trappers wedded squaws in tribal ceremonies. Ed Rose married a Crow squaw and became a Crow chief.

The Crows went to war with the Nez Perce. A brave slashed Ed Rose with a tomahawk, splitting Rose's nose wide open. Crude savage surgery made his nose grow crooked, marked by a livid scar. After that strangers identified him by his twisted nose. But the Crows, sliding further each day into civilization, were too peaceful.

Ed Rose left them.

He joined the Aricaras tribe. History does not record whether he kissed his Crow squaw when leaving her, chances are he did not. For a trapper thought more of a good horse than he did a squaw. If a squaw died, he could get another for nothing; if his horse died, he either had to barter good pelts or purchase another horse.

Ashley was fighting the British for the Northwest fur trade. Each year the trappers held a *rendezvous* on the Wind River of Wyoming. Ed Rose spoke to Ashley one spring while there to trade in his furs.

"The Aricaras aim to jump your fur cache, Ashley," he said. He had already quit that tribe for a trapper's existence. "I heered them talkin' about robbin' you."

"They're my friends," said Ashley.

Ed Rose shrugged his buckskin shoulders. "That's what they tell you. But an Injun is a tricky critter."

Ashley was strong-willed, stubborn. At that time, he was big boss of the fur traders. Ed Rose did not have too savory a reputation among the buckskin men. Ashley was proud, and he figured his logic was better than a squaw-man's.

"I think you're wrong, Ed."

ED ROSE SAID no more. He went to the barrel of green whiskey set in the clearing. Trappers, fresh from the creeks, were celebrating, drinking up their winter profits. Ashley buyers were purchasing furs, arguing over prices and quality. After all, it made no difference to Ed Rose. If Ashley was so bullheaded, let him pay.

The Indians jumped Ashley and got his furs. They drove him and his trappers down the river. Finally word got through to the United States cavalry which came to Ashley's rescue. But still the Aricaras had the troops and trappers outnum-

bered. Ed Rose had been caught in the battle.

"Some Sioux are camped up on the bluffs," said Rose. "If we get them on our side, we should win."

But the Sioux were reluctant to enter the battle. Ed Rose was known as a notorious liar; they discounted his talk greatly. They did not trust a White man's promise too far, even if he had once been a Sioux squaw-man.

"You help us whip these redskins," said Ed Rose, "an' we'll let you rob their teepees. That all right with you?"

To this the Sioux agreed, partially. Some went home; some stayed to fight. But most of them sat in the shade and watched the fight from the bluffs. Finally the Aricaras had enough.

They offered peace terms. The trappers and cavalry rejected them. Ashley wanted all his pelts back. The redskins promised to return only part of them. They decided to renew the fight.

Ed Rose squinted across the hills. "Them hellions ain't gonna fight no longer. They got their bellies' full. They aim to pull out, Ashley."

"What would you do, Ed?"

"Me, I'd raid their camp. Get them furs back. Otherwise, they'll take all they can carry an' leave danged little behind."

Again Ashley erred. "I don't figure that way, Ed. They won't leave. They've fought for them furs, an' they'll stay with them to the end—not leave an' only take part of them."

Again, Rose shrugged.

HE WAS RIGHT, again. Under cover of darkness the Indians retreated, taking the bulk of the pelt-try with them. They broke into small bands, thereby breaking up the Whites and the cavalry. And Ashley lost most of his precious furs.

The United States army used Rose as a guide. Colonel Leavenworth had great respect for Rose's judgement and word. But Ed Rose, history records, had a spotty record. Rumor holds that, at one time, he was a member of an outlaw gang that inhabited an island in the Mississippi river. This gang robbed river boats and carried on a dangerous and lucrative form of thievery.

Nobody knows just how Ed Rose died. Some say he was killed fighting the Crows or the Gros Ventres, the "Big Bellies." But the site of his grave was accurately marked during the nineteenth century. Nobody knows who buried him or the year of his passing, peaceful or in war, whichever way death came to claim him.

For years the river-boats plying between St. Louis and Fort Benton, the end of navigable water on the Missouri River in Montana territory, used to stop and refuel with cottonwood and boxelder logs near Ed Rose's grave.

The grave therefore became a landmark. Many trappers, heading for the Rockies after a trip "outride" to St. Louis, probably pointed out the grave to some tenderfoot on board.

"There's Ed Rose's grave," one might have said. "Ed was one of the first trappers in this country. He come in right behin' Louis an' Clark. He was a buckskin man."

Buckskin man....

THE END

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

Blood and Bullet Law

Brand New Book-Length Novel

By T. W. FORD

Hang The Deadwood On Him!

By WESTON CLAY

The deadwood was pretty well hung on King Lorenz for the murder of Jem Ward. But one piece of evidence didn't quite fit in.

THE BIG MAN with the erect soldierly bearing in the saddle paused for a moment as he came atop the low knoll with its single sentinel of tree. North and south stretched open range, public grazing land. Glancing over his big right shoulder a moment his eyes rested on the fresh-turned furrows of that nestor's place tucked back there against the low spine of ridge. Warling or Warten, something like that, was the hoeman's name who'd squatted down there. A scowl darkened his heavy homely face with the sabre scar seaming its left cheek a moment. A cowman himself, he instinctively hated anybody who put a plow through

grazing land. Then he rode down off the knoll, eastward, into the little gully that ran to Whisky Creek.

As he neared the narrow creek he could see the fence-line of the Box-L of King Lorenz ahead in the afternoon sunlight. The horseman slowed. As Jem Ward of the Circle-W, he had to be wary when he neared Lorenz range; he and King Lorenz were old bitter feudists. Lorenz shoved back his coat of rich gray cloth clear of his gun holster, revealing the gold-studded broad belt girding his flat body. Jem Ward was a wealthy brand-owner, an open-handed warm-spirited man who thought nothing of walking into one of Paradise's big bars and slapping down fifty dollars and telling the drink wranglers to serve the crowd till the fifty was gone. But now his face saddened as he looked beyond the Box-L fence.

A little up on one side of the gully, squatted in some scrub growth, a man lifted his hatless head cautiously. His eyes narrowed, avarice mirrored in the hard pupils, as he watched the rider. He shifted the Winchester up in the crook of his arm.

Jem Ward walked his horse twenty more yards, then swung out of the custom-made saddle and strode slowly toward where the creek bowed out from inside Box-L fenceline. In the shadows of a pine he drew off his cream-hued sombrero with a reverent gesture, preparing to cross the creek. He moved with a slight limp, a memento of one of his earlier range wars with King Lorenz. The man in the brush, behind him now, rose silently. He steadied the rifle over a boulder, tongued his heavy lips once.

Then the weapon barked savagely. Down at the creek edge, Jem Ward seemed to lift slightly, head throwing back as if hit by a sudden pain in his spine. He swayed. The rifle *spanged* again. Ward was thrown a few feet, came down flat on his face, and never stirred. The second bullet had landed within inches of the first, smack between his shoulder blades..

HEAVY-BODIED Ben Warling with the mild apologetic smile slammed into Paradise about ten o'clock that evening. But when the hoeman hurried up the steps of the sheriff's office he wore no hint of a smile. Rather his beard-stubbled honest broad face had a grave half-scared look.

"Jem Ward's dead—been killed," he got out thickly when he stood before the lanky gray-headed sheriff, Mack Collins. "He—it's awful, awful," Warling went on. "He—he was shot in the back."

Collins, a man who'd been sheriff of Paradise for more than twelve years, remained calm. He put his cigar down on the rolltop desk where he'd been playing solitaire, cut his eyes at his two deputies, then studied the hoeman. He knew Warling, had been out to see him several times. King Lorenz of the Box-L had made complaints that the hoeman was stealing table beef from his thin herds, killing a cow critter now and then. Warling in turn claimed Lorenz had threatened to run him out of the country. Warling was the picture of a man of the soil, sawed-off, thick shoulders stooped by his labors, humble in attitude. He had a trick of blinking when asked a question as if he didn't understand at first.

"Tell us about it, Warling," Collins said finally. He had no feeling about sod-busters himself. He realized they were a part of a new stage in the development of the west, that they had come to stay. "Tell us about it," he repeated more gently. The hoeman seemed half paralized with terror.

Ben Warling worked his heavy soil-blackened hands, stared down at a cracked boot. He finally found his voice. Late that afternoon, he thought he'd heard a shot, but he'd been in his barn mending harness and couldn't be sure. After a while though, curiosity mounting, he had climbed aboard his plow horse and gone out to have a looksee around. He'd seen fresh hoofprints leading into the gully that ran to Whisky Creek. When he went down there he

found Jem Ward, dead, gunned in the back. That was all. Except that he noticed those fancy diamond rings Ward wore were missing.

"Any tracks or sign around?" Collins asked. Warling shuddered as if in recollection and said he'd been too scared to notice much.

"You didn't see any rider moving off? There's a heap of flat open range around there?"

Warling blinked stupidly, fingered his lower lip. Then he seemed to comprehend and pointed at his dark eyes, squinting a little. "I don't see so good at a distance, Mister Sheriff." He smiled apologetically.

CARPEN, ONE of the deputies, was already running a finger over the map of the Paradise country on the side wall as Collins unjacked his long body from the chair and reached for the gunbelt on a wall peg.

"Here's the point," the deputy said. "Right down there on the creek —on top of Box-L fence, Mack! My Gawd!....It looks bad. You know how the bank turned down Lorenz on an extension of his notes last week. And Ward was one of the directors of the bank, now."

Mack Collins' mouth tautened. Everybody in Paradise knew that the haughty, arrogant King Lorenz was almost dead broke, on his last legs, in danger of losing the big chunk of range a single acre of which he refused to sell. Collins said calmly they'd ride out and take a look. He and Quick, the other deputy, headed up the north trail from Paradise with Ben Warling.

It was just as they took the west fork off the main stage road that the clodlike Warling recalled another detail. "As I was coming down the gully, almost on top of the body, I heard a sound like somebody digging. Like—uh—a shovel scraping. Then—it stopped," he explained laboriously.

That made little sense to the sheriff till they arrived at the scene where the body lay. The grayness of dawn was thinning and taking on a roseate tint as the sun neared the horizon rim. A shifting haze hung over the waters of the narrow swift-running creek. It burbled with gay turbulence as they stared down at the dead body. Mack Collins swore softly once as he examined the wounds.

"His rings are gone all right," said Dave Quick the deputy.

"And his dinero too," Collins bit off harshly, going through Jem Ward's pockets. "And Jem never carried less than four-five hundred on him." He stood up. "Whoever ambushed him, expected him to be here ...Let's look around some."

EVENTUALLY, finding no sign in the gully, the sheriff himself led the way across the creek, hopping from boulder to boulder. They eeled through the rusty Box-L wire, an old rotten fencepost shaking as they did. The Box-L was badly run down. A few scrawny cow critters eyed them curiously from around the end of a low swell ahead. Collins turned up the creek inside the fence. And as the first rays of the sun fingered the new-born day, they could make out the mound of an old grave some yards ahead under a gaunt yellow pine.

"King Lorenz" wife," Collins said shortly.

They stood over it a moment. Back up the slope from the creek at that point stood the ruins of the first modest little ranch-house Lorenz had built when he moved into this country more than a score of years ago. Later, when he had built up his herds and acquired more land, he had constructed a larger place further to the southeast. The original home had been struck by lightning a few years back and been burnt to a low charred crater.

"Wasn't them two—Ward and Lorenz—supposed to have started their fight over a woman?" the deputy asked.

Collins nodded, rubbing his long face. "This was the woman...Lorenz won her and wedded her...Jem Ward never forgave him." He jerked his head toward the ruins of the little house. "Let's look around up here."

Within a couple of minutes after

they had stepped through a gap in one of the fire-charred walls, Dave Quick the deputy found it. It was a spot in the corner where some charred boards had been stirred and moved over the earth.

When they moved them the fresh-turned dirt beneath was plain. Collins took a stick and dug down, pushing the earth aside carefully. The tip of a blue bandanna showed. Then he was lifting it out, opening it from a wad. And the three of them stared down at the three diamond rings that had been removed from the flashy Jem Ward's hands.

"Guess this is it," Mack Collins said, voice slightly hoarse. Though King Lorenz had become stand-offish and haughty, cold to the world, the sheriff had always respected him. "Jem Ward was always in love with Lorenz' wife. Apparently used to slip in to see her grave. Lorenz knew it, I reckon....And after Ward blocked the extension on his notes at the bank, King Lorenz waited here for him."

"And robbed him afterward to make that look like the motive," Quick put in.

Collins nodded. "The dinero ain't here, though...."

INSIDE OF A couple of hours they were at Lorenz' big ranchhouse, the second place he had built. Somehow now it reminded Collins of a great animal slowly dying on its feet. The big bunkhouse was boarded up, the roof sagging at one corner. The two old cowhands Lorenz kept on to work his pitifully small herds now lived in a little cabin beyond it. The ranchyard fence was broken down, sagging into the rank grass at several points. The main house itself was paint-peeling, rags stuffed in the holes of its many broken windows. When they mounted them, the front steps sagged precariously under their weight, the rotted wood threatening to give way.

It was some spell after Collins rapped before the door opened. A tall man, slim and willowy as a fencing blade but with an old hollowed face stood in it, hastily buttoning the color of his frayed but spotless white shirt. His black suit was rusty, worn, but neatly patched. Circles of dissipation ringed his eyes but the pupils stared at them with an admixture of cold scorn and arrogance. Whisky hung heavy on his breath yet he was scrupulously clean-shaven, his iron-gray hair carefully parted. He was King Lorenz.

He made a slight bow. "Good day, sheriff. Won't you step in?" he said with studied courtesy but without any warmth.

They moved into a dim room whose tattered curtains were drawn as if in mourning for its long-departed richness. Rats had eaten great holes in the carpet. Plaster sagged from the walls in great bulging blisters. Even in the yellow half light the threadbare state of the old furniture with springs gaping from the sofa couldn't be missed. For a brief instant, Collins felt sorry for this old whipped cow baron. He had rallied from the death of his wife, though cutting himself off from the world. But when his only child, Marianne, had run off with that jewellry drummer, King Lorenz had been broken. From then on, he drank constantly, letting his spread go to ruin.

Then Collins remembered his official capacity. He gave Lorenz the story of Jem Ward's death. Lorenz nodded, hard-eyed as ever. Then the sheriff told him what they'd found. Lorenz' nostrils whitened and narrowed.

Collins swallowed. "So, Lorenz, I'll have to take you in on a charge of slaying Jem Ward."

Lorenz quivered, venom sparkling from his sunken eyes. "You — you dare to accuse me of a rotten lowdown thing like that?" he cried fiercely. When Collins nodded curtly, Lorenz tried to outstare him. Then the middle-aged man sagged inside his clothes. He half turned away, heavy-lipped mouth working.

The next instant he was whipping back, snaking a Colts from under his coat. But Mack Collins was a veteran lawman. He grabbed out his own gun and smashed the rancher across the forearm. The latter's gun bounced

across the tattered rug. Quick hit him and pinned him against the wall.

A short while later, Collins and his deputy headed back for town with the prisoner, bringing the dead man behind them on the extra pony. Ben Warling, shaking his heavy head as if he couldn't believe it, rode across the range toward his own place.

THE SHERIFF took them into Paradise by a backroad and used an alley to arrive behind the jail. But they had been spotted, and the other deputy, Carpen, had already spread the story. A couple of hours after sundown, a muttering milling mob began to gather before the squat dobie jailhouse. Affable, liberal Jem Ward had been well-liked, there was no sympathy for the arrogant Lorenz.

Jake Wefers, boss of *The Eldorado*, climbed up on a stump and began to harangue them, swinging a length of manila hemp in the moonlight suggestively. Some stones smacked the front of the jail. Collins threw open the door, faced them, staring coldly, and ordered them to disperse.

"King Lorenz will stand trial when the circuit judge comes through! Wait till then," he told them.

"Why wait?" bawled back Wefers, bald head gleaming. "He knew Jem Ward visited that grave. And Lorenz laid for him and burned him down in cold blood. By Gawd, I say we ain't waiting. We—"

"Men've been burnt down in hot blood," Collins cut him off in a drawl, sliding his Colts from his gunbelt. "Try to get the prisoner—and you'll find out!"

That cooled them off. Collins had a rep for being a man of his word and hard-bitten if prodded too far. There was more talk, some yelling, but soon men began to stray off in sullen groups. And inside, Mack Collins at at his desk, staring at a solitaire layout and thinking, thinking.

One thing he found it hard to swallow. King Lorenz might have struck in cold fury, in bitterness at having the bank turn him down. But for a man of Lorenz' pride to rob a dead body was almost unbelievable. Yes, he was busted. But still....The sheriff lifted his eyes to the clock ticking away over on the shelf. It was almost midnight.

No, a man of King Lorenz' breed could neither kill for profit nor take profit as the result of killing....*But—but*...Collins straightened in the swivel chair, *another man might profit from the death of Jem Ward—and, ultimately, of King Lorenz*....

THE APPROACHING dawn was just painting a grayish stripe in the eastern sky when Deputy Dave Quick pounded on the door of Warling the nester's cabin. Though the place had been dark, the plank door opened almost at once. Warling peered around the edge of it, a Frontier model Colts poked before him.

"What do ya want?" he said gruffly.

"You ain't seen King Lorenz about, have you?" Quick said hurriedly, then went on before Warling could answer. "He broke outa the jail and he was headed up this way, hitting for the ridge country, I reckon."

Warling's black eyes narrowed. He shook his head, mumbled a negative. But the color had drained from his face.

Quick said he'd be getting on, hit the saddle leather, rode down the path from the cabin to the trail and galloped into the night.

About a half hour passed. The night had skulked off. A rising gray light held the world with a thin haze hanging a few feet from the earth. From over by Whisky Creek a coyote bayed.

The next moment a gunshot crackled on top of the thud of the bullet smashing into the front of Ben Warling's cabin. And then a fierce coldly-angry voice called out.

"Come out, Warling! It's me, King Lorenz! Come out! You sent me to the rope—but I'm going to get you before they hang me! Come out!"

And down across the faint trail that wound by the cabin, some seventy odd feet from it, the slim

haughty figure of King Lorenz rose from the haze, his black pinch-crowned sombrero plain.

"Come out, Warling—or I'll come and get you! Come out and fight like a man!" Lorenz called again. He took a few steps, then sank. Only his sombrero showed above the grass.

A grimy curtain at a front window of the cabin stirred slightly. Gum metal glinted briefly behind it. Then the rifle crashed out, firing through the window pane. The bullet drilled squarely through King Lorenz' black hat, sending it swaying back and forth on the piece of brush on which it had been propped.

TWO MORE rifle shots screamed by it as if the man inside shot in a blind fury. There was a thudding smash. It was Warling's back door being busted open. Then Sheriff Mack Collins and Quick the deputy were inside the tiny place and had him covered from behind.

Twisting around from the window with the ungainly Winchester in the cramped quarters, Warling tried to lever another shell into it, but Collins sent him to his knees with a sharp crack of the gun barrel over his forehead that didn't quite knock him out. Possemen swarmed in from all sides. One of them led the ashen-faced King Lorenz into the room as a lamp was lighted.

Collins, a dangerous adamant lawman now, stood over Warling who cowered on his Teton pole cot.

"So your eyes are bad, eh, Warling!" the sheriff snapped. "You can't see so good at any distance. Yeah? So you could hear a shovel scraping across the creek—but couldn't see anybody ride away from there! But—just now—you could see danged well enough to hit a hat dead center at seventy odd feet in a danged bad light! Well?"

"It was a lucky shot," the hoeman said weakly, trying the apologetic smile, blinking.

"Like hell! You killed Jem Ward, knowing he came through that gulch on his visits to the grave. You killed him for profit. The rings you were afraid to try to sell though. And you hung the deadwood on Lorenz because he accused you of taking table beef from his herds."

The hoeman's eyes glittered venomously once. Then he stuck out his thick underlip and refused to speak.

They hung the deadwood on him in a matter of minutes. They ransacked the cabin without success, but out in his little barn, Quick discovered a loose floor plank. Under it, in a little hollow, wrapped in oilskin, was over four hundred and fifty dollars, more dinero than the hoeman had ever seen. It was the dinero taken from Jem Ward's body.

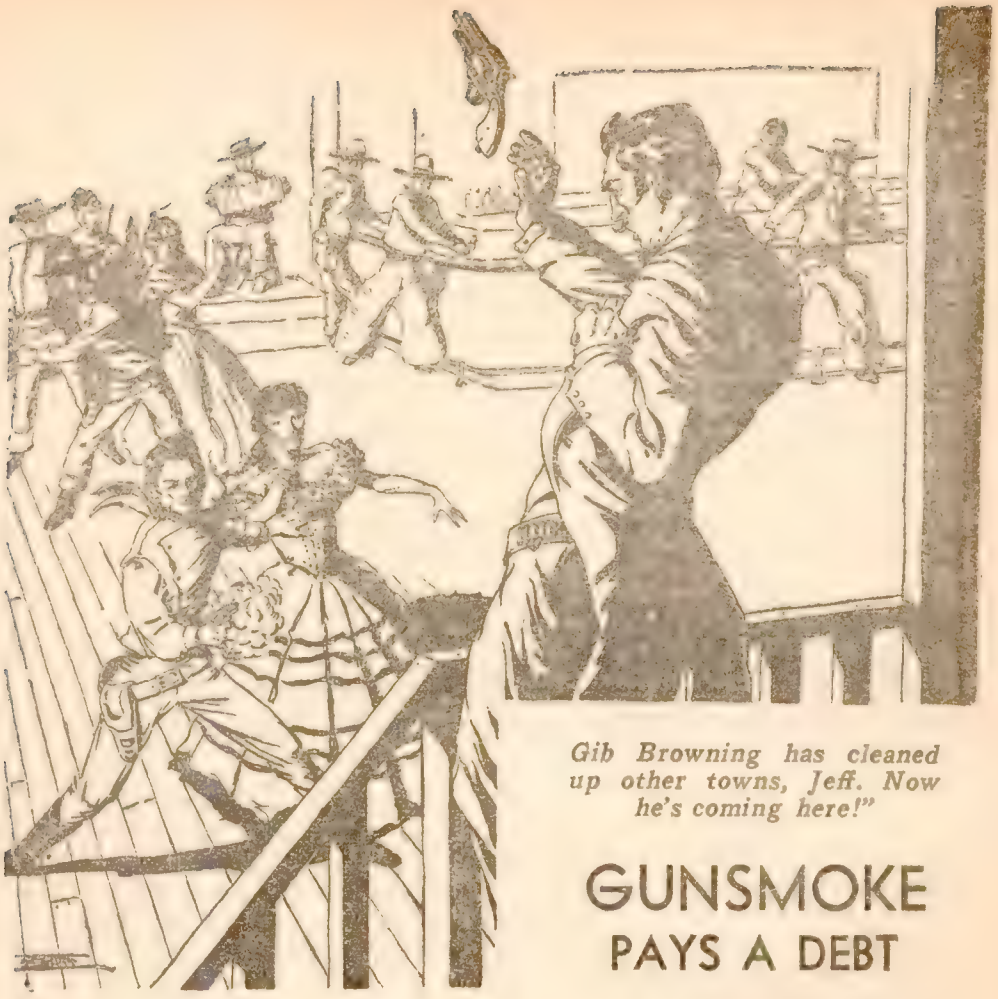
As they took him down the front path, handcuffed, for the ride back to Paradise's jail, the austere King Lorenz spoke to the sheriff.

"Mack," and it was the first time in years he had ever called another man by his first name, "what gave you the hunch anybody but me could have been guilty?"

The sheriff fitted a stogie into his lean face. "Lorenz, you might've killed in hate. And you might have robbed him to make it look as if that were the motive, throwing suspicion off yourself. But you wouldn't have buried those rings as if saving them for future use. *You,* Lorenz, you would have thrown them into that fast creek where nobody, not even yourself, would have ever found them. 'S all...Hey, somebody got a match?"

It was King Lorenz who produced one and held it to the sheriff's stogie. "Thank you, Mack. Thank you—for your compliment to my integrity." He looked around at the possemen, head still high but a human light in his eyes for once. "Gentlemen, I happen to have a few loose bills in my pocket. When we return to town, I'd be proud to set up drinks for the posse...."

THE END



Gib Browning has cleaned up other towns, Jeff. Now he's coming here!"

GUNSMOKE PAYS A DEBT

By Lee Floren

And Jeff Webb had one last chance to turn before it was too late!

JEFF WEBB was talking with his two gunmen when Mona Williams entered the saloonman's office. "That'll be all, boys," Webb said.

The two gunhands got to their feet and O'Shane, pocked with freckles, swaggered out, glancing at the woman but not acknowledging her presence. The other gunslinger, gaunt Purcell, had his predatory face emotionless. They went outside and the door closed behind them.

Mona spoke cynically. "Getting them ready for another night of killing and robbery, huh, Jeff?"

Jeff Webb turned his lanky form in his swivel chair and looked at her levelly. She was around thirty and her dark, red hair was tied into a hard ball, giving her face an unbecoming hardness.

"You ought to be at your faro table," the saloonman said. "What's bothering you, Mona?"

"Gib Browning is coming into Powdersmoke," said Mona slowly. "Gib Browning, the man who tamed Deadwood and Lead."

"Who told you this?"

"Mayor Kelly."

Webb got to his feet, a thin, dark man. He rubbed the palm of one hand idly on the lapel of his blue serge

suit, walked to the window and looked out into the gathering Montana night. Mona followed him.

She laid her hand on his arm. "Webb, what are you going to do?"

Webb was silent.

Her face was pale. "Webb, he'll kill you! He's tough and dangerous; he ran them out of Cheyenne and made it a good town—"

Webb's face was stoney.

"Webb—"

He turned, said, "I'll buy him off, Mona."

She bit her lip, teeth white on carmine. "You can't buy Gib Browning, Webb. They've tried it." She tried to hold her voice but it rose a little. "He'll clean Powdersmoke, like he straightened Lead. That means that you and these two gunmen of yours —O'Shane and Purcell—will have to go, Webb."

"I'll name a high price," said Webb.

Mona stood by the door. "You can't buy him," she repeated. "Webb, get rid of those two killers. We'll go south, to my ranch in Texas."

Webb shook his head.

AFTER SHE HAD gone, he remained there at the window. So Gib Browning, the town-tamer, was coming to run the wildness out of Powdersmoke. The town council had sent for him. Webb's smile was thin: Browning was coming to run him out—or kill him. And Gib Browning was Jeff Webb's brother.

Standing there, Jeff Webb remembered things. He remembered the little town, there on the Yellowstone River, remembered his father, Hank Webb, lying dead in the small room, the black scar of the rope around his broken neck.

Young Gib Webb—now Gib Browning—had looked at his older brother. "There are two roads ahead of us, Jeff," he had said. "One, the road the old man traveled—the road that led him to the gallow tree. Or the other the good road, the lawful road."

Jeff Webb said, "Which one, Gib?"

"I'm ridin' out, Jeff. The spread is your's. I'm going straight."

Jeff Webb had looked at the badland camp. Old Hank Webb had run an outlaw hangout, and the law had run him down. Now he lay with a broken neck....dead. Jeff had shrugged. "The old man didn't work it slick enough, Gib."

Gib studied him.

"You ride your way," said Jeff Webb. "I'll ride mine."

Jeff Webb had left the outlaw camp, had followed the gold-rushes across the West, into California, into Idaho. Now and then he heard of Gib Browning. Browning had taken his guns and his cold nerve into Cheyenne, into Malta. He had tamed these tows and he had killed men. Men of his brother's low ilk.

For Jeff Webb had become a parasite on the blood stream of the West. He would move into a wild raw town, he and his two gunhands, and they would take over. Saloons and merchants would pay them protection. If a business-man refused, usually he was found dead, later on. A mysterious death, a murder. And who had murdered him? Either O'Shane or Purcell. This would happen twice—then they would understand that Jeff Webb meant business, and pay handsomely.

Now Gib Browning was coming to tame Powdersmoke.

JEFF STOOD beside his office window and watched Gib Browning ride into town. Seven years had changed his brother. He was heavier, sitting a solid saddle, and his face had hardened, the lines etched deep by an eternal vigilance. But the darkness was still in him, that mad terrible darkness of big Hank Webb.

Gib Browning looked squarely at Jeff Webb. Their glances held for a long moment, but there was no recognition in the eyes of the town-tamer. Later Jeff Webb wondered just what his eyes had held.

O'Shane said, thickly, "So that's the great Gib Browning, huh?"

Purcell spoke. "Webb, we could go up the alley, meet him in the livery-barn. We could really welcome him to Powdersmoke." He tugged his sagging gunbelt tighter around his flat hips.

Mona looked at Webb slowly.

Webb said, "None of that, you two."

O'Shane said, "We can't let this button spoil our pay-off racket, Webb," and Webb looked at the squat man suddenly, his eyes sharp with anger. "Who's running this outfit?"

O'Shane wet his lips. "You are, Webb."

Webb ordered, "Get out, both of you! Pronto!"

O'Shane wet his lips again, glanced at Purcell. The bony man lifted thin shoulders, let them fall, they went outside.

"Trained lions," said Mona slowly. "They'll forget the whip someday, Webb, and claw you." She looked at Webb's twin .45s.

"I'll buy him," grunted Jeff Webb.

She said, "Let me know how you come out, because he's coming this way." She left by the back door. Webb waited, smile tight across his lips. The knock came. "Come in," he said.

Gib Browning stood there, looking at his brother. Webb had the impression suddenly that time had run up on them, that this was seven years ago with the Yellowstone River lapping on the boulders.

"Well?" asked Jeff Webb.

Gib's voice had deepened. "You seem nervous, Jeff," he said. "Who in this town knows we are brothers?"

"Just us two."

"I was in National City," said Gib Browning, "when I got a letter, asking me to come to Powdersmoke."

"The mayor, I suppose?"

"That's my business, Jeff. You're business is my concern too, Jeff. You've gone a long way down the ladder in these seven years. I've heard of you in other towns."

"How much do you want?"

Gib Browning was silent.

Jeff Webb continued with, "I'll double the pay the council gives you. You can draw a salary from them and twice that much from me. I've got a gold mine here. My men collect a sum each day from each saloon, each store, each business establishment, and that allows them to run the next day. They collect each night. What is your answer?"

"I don't sell."

Jeff Webb snorted. "Everybody has a selling price, Gib. Some are just higher than the other fellow. All right, I'll make it three times the council salary."

"You're dirty," said Gib Browning. His voice held disgust. "You're filthy, Jeff." He stepped to one side, his back to the wall, his hands on his guns. "There's somebody listening at that door."

Webb had heard nothing.

O'Shane and Purcell came in. Jeff Webb watched them, scowling. Gib Browning had keen ears. O'Shane said, "So you're the mighty Gib Browning, huh?"

Gib Browning hit him. O'Shane stumbled; Browning hit him again. O'Shane sat down, mouthing blood. Browning had his gun on Purcell. Purcell stepped back, gaunt face pale under his whiskers.

Gib Browning clipped, "Your gundogs, Jeff?"

Webb smiled. "You treat them rough, fellow."

O'Shane got slowly a-foot, keeping his hand from his gun. He balanced himself, and Webb growled angrily, "No more fighting, O'Shane!" The gunman looked at Webb, hate in his eyes, then he looked at Purcell. Webb did not see Purcell slowly shake his head. The tension left O'Shane.

He said, "Come on, Purcell."

They left.

Jeff Webb said, "He won't forget that, Gib. You took the play out of my hands, maybe." He was looking out the window. Mona was crossing the street. He was suddenly tired, suddenly sick of it all. She was sick of it, too. He thought of her ranch in Texas. She had described it so accurately the place seemed real.

"He's your lion," said Gib Browning, "but I'll tame him." he crossed the room and put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Jeff, for my sake, drop out of this. Your hands will get bloody, too bloody. Then you'll go like the old man went."

Jeff Webb remembered that broken, swollen neck.

"Get out," he clipped.

Gib Browning looked at him, eyes suddenly flinty. He said, "All right, Jeff, if you want it that way," and Jeff Webb heard that hardness, that flatness, again enter his voice. Gib Browning walked across the dried planks and closed the door behind him.

Webb watched him walk down the street.

FOR SOME TIME, Webb stood there and looked at that closed door. Inside of him a wind shrilled, beat against him. Could he back out? Could he leave Powdersmoke pull his gunmen out, go to another town?

If he moved, his strength would be broken. Word would sweep ahead of him that Jeff Webb was on the run, that Gib Browning had run him and his gunhands out of Powdersmoke. And the next town they tried to work—

"T'hell with you," a saloonman would say. "I pay protection to nobody, Webb. I hear that Gib Browning ran you outa Powdersmoke. Don't start your ol' game here, or we'll send for Browning to hoist you outa this town."

Webb walked to the window. Browning was moving down Powdersmoke's mainstreet, and O'Shane and Purcell stood across the street. They were watching the lawman with a deadly deliberateness. Webb stroked his clean-shaven blocky chin as he watched them. They were like two rats watching a tomcat.

Rats, thought Webb.

Gib Browning went into the Pine Cone Bar. Ten minutes later, he came out, entered the building next door, the Mercantile Store. He was there for a little while, then he went into the next building, the Emporium.

O'Shane and Purcell entered. "He's tellin' them not to pay us protection," growled O'Shane. He juggled his .45, spun the cylinder.

Purcell draped his gaunt frame around a chair. He was a fast man in a tight, but he moved with a deceptive laziness. Now his unblinking eyes fastened themselves on Jeff Webb with a snake-like attention. "Well, Webb?" he drawled.

Webb considered. "Maybe we oughta call it quits, men."

O'Shane and Purcell exchanged glances. The door opened slowly and Mona Williams came in. The woman stopped with her back against the door. "Am I intruding?" she asked.

Webb said, "Stay," and put his attention back to these two.

O'Shane snapped, "So you aim to cowtaw, huh, Webb? Are you gettin' white aroun' the gills just 'cause a two-bit town-tamer—" He stabbed a hot glance at Mona. "Or is this filly talkin' you into changin'—"

Webb hooked the leg of O'Shane's chair. He spilled the man hard on the floor. When O'Shane looked up, Webb had his cutter out.

"Watch your tongue," growled Webb.

Mona was a little pale. She said, "I'll go, Webb," and Webb said, heavily, "No, stay, Mona."

O'Shane bunched his legs, got up. He was careful to keep his hand from his holstered gun. Purcell got to his feet.

"*We* ain't callin' it quits," growled Purcell.

The tick of the clock on Jeff Webb's desk sounded loud. They stood there, three predatory men, and then O'Shane broke the silence. "We better make our collections, Purcell," he said slowly.

Webb watched them leave, thoughts turgid. He heard their boots go down the hall, heard the outer door slam shut. He saw them through the window as they walked down the sidewalk.

"Then you've broken with them?" asked Mona.

Webb shrugged. "They'll come back."

Mona's eyes were serious. "O'Shane will never forget you bouncing him on the floor, Webb. The man has a stubborn, sullen pride. You didn't hurt him but you make him look foolish. And a man with O'Shane's pride can't afford that."

"We'll see."

Mona was silent, eyes bitter with unvoiced thoughts. Webb walked the room, listening to the pound of his boots. He was thinking of Gib

Browning. Could he match guns with his only brother?

THAT NIGHT he walked Powdersmoke's mainstreet. This was a raw, new town, and gold held it together. When that gold petered out the town's seams would split. He met the Reverend Thompson on the corner. He lifted his hat. The minister asked a moment with him, and Jeff Webb stopped.

"Your trail of terror and subjugation has come to an end, Mr. Webb. I only hope that you and your two men can read the handwriting and move out of Powdersmoke before Mr. Browning has to kill you."

"You sound sure of Browning's power," murmured Webb.

"The just is on his side, Mr. Webb. And when a man is armed with the just, then he never fails."

Webb studied him, nodded absently. He went on, the night around him. Purcell came out the shadows, and Jeff Webb holstered his gun slowly.

"Your nerves are touchy," growled the lanky killer. "Webb, they're paying off, man! They're not puttin' much faith in this Brownin' fella; they're payin' off to me an' O'Shane."

Webb stared, hardly believing. Then he understood. These men were too afraid of the guns of Purcell and O'Shane, and they were still paying protection. Paying it despite the great Gib Browning who now walked Powdersmoke's main stem.

Then this game could go on and on? Or could it. Standing there, Webb gave this brief, scathing thought. No, Gib Browning would stop it....or he would die in the attempt. For the reputation of Gib Browning was at stake, too.

For if his guns—and those of O'Shane and Purcell—were too much for Browning to buck, then Browning would be done as a town tamer. Word would sweep out that Powdersmoke had been too tough, that Gib Browning could not tame it. And the reputation of Gib Browning would be broken. He would be done, he and his guns.

Face grim, Jeff Webb faced these facts. That was the way things shaped up. His own reputation—and that of Gib Browning—was at stake this night. One of them had to give. Would it be Gib Browning?

Webb doubted that. Sure, the merchants, the saloonmen, were paying protection to him, but Gib Browning would not let it go on. He would move over the merchants, the saloonmen, and he would strike at the source of the trouble itself, he would strike at himself and O'Shane and Purcell.

And guns would talk in red letters. Webb could see his brother now, up there in his hotel room. He could see him pacing the floor, walking restlessly, caged by his thoughts. But he knew the stern material that was woven into Gib Browning.

Webb said, "I'll see you in my office, inside an hour."

Purcell looked at him from his gaunt height. Then, wordlessly, he turned, and the night closed behind him. Webb was cold inside, and the night air seemed suddenly chilly. Mona came out of the night.

Webb asked, almost angrily, "Are you following me, woman?"

She caught the inflection of his voice. "You're the man I intend to marry soon, Webb. I don't want to see you walk into death."

He looked hard at her.

They walked down the street, both silent. Now Gib Browning came out of the shadows, lithe and tough. He said, "Good evening," and Mona and Webb stopped, looking at him. The town-tamer wore a thin smile under his small mustache. "Your hounds are collecting their blood money, Webb."

Webb nodded.

Browning balanced himself, tough in his boots. Webb saw that there was no give to this man. "The local people don't trust me enough, Webb. They're still afraid of you and your dogs. Are you calling them off?"

Webb remembered suddenly, *This man is my brother, my blood brother*, and he said, "I'm calling them in, Browning."

"You're too late, I think." Browning was purring the words. "I think they've taken things into their own hands, Webb."

Webb asked, "What do you mean?"

Browning shrugged. He looked across the street suddenly, and Webb noticed the town-tamer had his guns out of holster. Browning was bunching his shoulders, then he held his draw. "That street lamp makes that shadow look like a man hidden against that building."

Suddenly Webb caught the full impact of his brother's calling. Sometime, somewhere, there would be a shadow, in some cowtown, some mining settlement. And out of that shadow would come flame and lead, and Gib Browning would go down. Vigilance was eternally with him.

And what was his reward? One hundred and fifty bucks a month. When a good gambler could make many times that— Sure, he had the respect, the friendship, of good law-abiding people. But they would not stop *that* bullet....Browning would.

Browning said, "Good night," and bowed to Mona.

AN HOUR LATER, Jeff Webb paced his office. The hand slipped past and circled the clock again, and still O'Shane and Purcell failed to show up. Webb remembered Gib Browning's prophecy.

Had O'Shane and Purcell turned against him? Had they hit out on their own? That thought brought an ironical smile to Jeff Webb's thin lips. Ignorant O'Shane, stupid and heavy, and thin, tough Purcell. They did not have brains enough to hold this scheme together.

Yet, they didn't show up.

Now Jeff Webb went out on Powdersmoke's mainstreet. Miners were moving across the plank walks, their boots loud against the cacophany of sound coming from saloons. A drunken percentage girl staggered out of the Rose House. She bumped into Jeff Webb, who courteously stepped back.

"The great Jeff Webb!" She balanced herself with her hands on her hips, her red lips twisted drunkedly. "The great parasite, the man who Powdersmoke pays protection to! So your two gun-dogs turned and snapped at you, huh?"

"You're drunk, Martia," he said.

She grabbed his shoulder and held him. "I like you, Webb. Like you too much, I guess. Oh, I know that Mona floozy has you! But Webb, they bought out the Anchor House, and they're using it as headquarters."

A crowd had gathered. Jeff Webb bowed, said to a man. "You'd better get her inside, Joe," and went down the street. Behind him, the girl was fighting Joe, who was trying to carry her into the saloon. Her curses were sharp behind him.

Mona came out of her bar, face pale under the lamplight. "Webb, Martia was right. O'Shane and Purcell have bought the Anchor House. They're openly boasting of breaking with you."

Webb said, "Get back to your faro table, girl."

"But, Webb—"

He had a sudden moment of longing for her. He kissed her, her lips moist on his, and then she stepped back. He said, "Get ready to leave, Mona. Pack your things. We'll be married at Oroville in the morning."

"Then you're leaving, Webb? To Texas?"

He nodded. "Yes, but not to Texas. My reputation would follow me that far." He was gazing into the harsh night with its shrill wind. "This will have to be South America, Mona. The Argentine."

"I'll meet you inside the hour. We'll get the midnight stage."

Webb went into the Anchor House. O'Shane hitched his gun around, came forward. Purcell sat with his back against the wall, chair tilted. Miners lined the bar and games were rolling along.

"A drink on the house?" asked O'Shane.

Webb looked at him. "No," he said. He looked hard at Purcell, who stared back. Anger flooded Webb, but he held it. Mingled with it was a disgust for himself. He had sunk low, damned low. Too low, he thought. He went out.

The wind was singing in the eaves. Gib Browning stood across the street, half-hidden by shadows. He was watching the Anchor House. He nodded impersonally, and Webb went to

his office. He started throwing clothes in a suitcase.

But his mind was far from his work. For the first time in his life he was running away from a problem. Running away from danger, from a mess of trouble he himself had stired. That thought was bitter gall inside him. It pounded and bit like acid through his blood.

He straightened, a shirt in his hand. Now Gib Browning, his brother, would move against O'Shane and Purcell, one man against two guns. And they might cut Browning done, dump him bloody and dead on Powdersmoke's dusty mainstreet. Jeff Webb's heart was pounding. Limned by lamplight, blinds pulled low, he stood there, pondering, face bleak. And then, from outside, came the sodden snarl of guns.

They broke across the wind, giving it danger and death. Jeff Webb listened to them idly, for gunfire was a common thing in this town. And as he listened, he plumbed the sounds for personal danger, as was his custom. Then he shrugged. Soon this town would be but a memory, and not a welcome one at that.

He turned to his packing.. Men were moving out on the street, and he heard Gib Browning's orders. Mona burst in without knocking, and Webb had his right-hand gun on her. He sheathed it, scowling.

"What is it?"

"Webb, O'Shane and Purcell—They just shot it out with King Johnson of the Lucky Dog mine—They killed him!"

"Maybe Johnson was looking for it. He's been walking high and mighty—"

"But two against one, Webb?"

Webb had the sudden impression on his mind: O'Shane and Purcell, spread out for protection, moving against King Johnson. And cutting Johnson down without a chance. Webb had seen it before. Johnson didn't mean a tinker's dam to him, and he told Mona just that.

"But now Gib Browning will move against them, Webb."

He looked at her, thinking.

"Well?" he asked.

Her shoulders fell; she sat down. "Webb," she said, "I'll have to tell you. First, Gib Browning and I were to keep it secret. But I sent for Gib Browning—I sent for your brother to come—"

"My brother? How did you know?"

"I saw his picture once, in a Cheyenne paper. I thought he looked like you. That bothered me, and then I talked with him once in Deadwood. He told me about you—and your dad—and himself— Webb, you're not angry with me?"

WEBB STOOD, made of stone. Outside the wind howled; inside another wind, stronger and more bitter, cut away at him. So Mona had sent for Gib Browning! Sent for his brother to keep him, Jeff Webb, from sinking any lower in the social scale. And now his brother was moving against Purcell and O'Shane—

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

She spoke slowly, weighing each word. "Webb, Browning and I talked it over. We decided we'd give you a chance to make a man out of yourself, all by yourself— We decided—" She choked suddenly.

She was weeping suddenly, weeping almost silently. Webb thought, *This is the first time I have ever seen her cry*, and something pulled at him. A stillness had come over the street outside, and only the wind sang.

He left her there.

Outside, he stood in the shadows, watching. Other men were pulled back also, their eyes on the Anchor House. Out there in the dust lay the crumpled, broken form of a dead man. Webb gave it a casual glance. King Johnson.

A man murmured, "Here comes Gib Browning."

Webb looked at Browning, coming down the street.

"He went home for more cartridges," the man said quietly.

Browning came forward, heading for the Anchor House. Webb looked through the big windows opposite. He could see O'Shane and Purcell inside. One was behind the bar, hunkered with a rifle that pointed on the front door, and O'Shane crouched behind an overturned card table, his

sixgun lying across its rim. Webb took this scene into him and held it and inspected it.

Browning stopped, just beyond King Johnson's body. He called, "I'm coming in after you!" and the wind tore the words away, spilling them across darkness. Dust whipped on the street, spiralling and almost hiding the town-tamer who stood there, guns out. Now Browning moved toward the Anchor House's front door.

Webb watched, throat dry. The cold nerve, the toughness of this man, his brother, stirred him. Browning would walk in there, walk into his nest, and shoot it out. There was no foolhardy bravery in this. A brave man wanted two men, and he took the shortest way to get them.

Now Browning was almost to the plank walk. A bullet came from inside, shattering a window. But Browning was too low and the lead buried over Jeff Webb's head.

Webb hollered, "Gib, I'm siding you!"

Browning did not look around, did not stop. Now Jeff Webb was running across the street, running with both guns out. Browning saw him then and stabbed him a quick, hard glance.

WEBB WAS light inside. Suddenly time had pulled a weight off him, giving him a grim boyishness. He ran between the two buildings, came in on the alley. And as he entered the rear door of the Anchor House, Gib Browning came in the front.

O'Shane and Purcell were trapped between two sets of guns. For a moment there was only the push of the wind in the boxelder outside. Then Purcell's stiff cry broke this sound.

"I'll take Webb, O'Shane!"

The roar of guns smashed the wind into eternity. Purcell was turning, rifle swinging in a fast, short arc. And he spilled the trigger on the move, the lead whamming into the casing beside Webb.

Webb shot doggedly. He was cold inside, and he placed four bullets. Purcell screamed, "I—I—" and staggered ahead, rifle falling. Webb shot again and said, "That's for sure," and Purcell tripped, fell on his face.

Webb thought, "Got one cartridge left." He put his gun against O'Shane, but the gunman was down. Gib Browning wore a crooked, tired grin across his heavy face as he looked at Webb.

"Good work," he murmured. He added, "Brother."

Browning went down slowly, his knees bending, his sixguns toppling into the sawdust. Fear tearing him, Webb ran across the room, caught him and held him. Mona broke in, face pale.

"Here, I'll help you!"

Webb looked at the woman with the dark red hair. "You go get the doctor in his office, and I'll carry him there."

She ran ahead of him. With townspeople following, he carried Gib Browning into the medico's office, closed the door behind him. He laid the man on the high table. Browning smiled crookedly. He held Webb's hand.

"Got me—along the ribs— One lucky shot."

The doc said, "He's got four busted ribs, that's all. Here, Mona, help me with this bandage...."

Jeff Webb looked at Gib Browning. "Mona told me you two had cooked this up," he said slowly. He searched for words. "We're going to be married this morning in Oroville and then we're going to South America, the Argentina."

Browning nodded, eyes somber.

Webb throat was tight. "I'll write you from there. And when you get tired of this law trail, when you want to settle down and punch cows—"

"I'll go down to the Argentine," finished Gib Browning.

THE END

A Tombstone For Tombes

By RAY HAYTON

I GUESS, in a way, it was a funny thing for a man to dream of, the way old Toombes did, but once you got to know him, you could understand it wasn't so fantastic after all. For more than fifty years he had explored the mountains and deserts around Silver City, looking for gold—and now that the years were weighing heavy on his stooped shoulders, he began to dream of it more and more.

It wasn't much, as last wishes go; just the desire that he have a real funeral, and—above all—that a tombstone be placed to mark the spot where Toombes lay in his last big sleep. I guess he explained it best himself, that night Ma Hawkins found him lying in the alley, and dragged him to a room in her boarding house, as she had done many a time before.

"I ain't goin' prospectin' no more," he told her, after she'd put him to bed, "I've found gold twice—tons of it—and I spent it faster'n they could get it out of the ground. I may be broke now—but I'll find a way to live—and I'll stay in town. I've always had a hankerin'," he lay in the bunk, his scrawny hands clutching at the guilt, "To have me a tombstone above my grave when I pass into the great beyond."

He looked at her quickly, to see if she were laughing, and finding she wasn't, went on in a low voice, "Mebbe it sounds strange—but I gotta reason for it. More'n once I met death on the desert. More'n once, but on the barren plains, or high in the crooked hills, I met death, and seen him reach for me—and always, I thought of how, come spring or fall, some other prospector, grubbin' the hills as I grubbed 'em, would come across a pile of bleached bones, and wonder what pore soul left 'em there, along with his life. I've seen many a pile of bones myself, dottin' the desert—and I've wondered who it was that passed away.

"Had lots of time to think—and I finally got me a dream. That when I pass on, there'll be a funeral—not a big 'un, but enough of a one to show that folks know I'm gone; and then a tombstone, mebbe just a simple slab of rock with my name on it, so's when folks stop by my grave they'll be able to say 'Old Toombes—he's occupyin' that spot'. It'll sorta make me feel I ain't died unbeknowenst to anyone—that my passin' has been noticed, and remarked on."

He closed his bloodshot eyes then, and went to sleep, and Ma Hawkins tip-toed out of the room, closing the door softly behind her. Now Ma wasn't no soft-hearted filly—after running a boarding house in Silver City for thirty years she'd grown callouses around her heart; but she knew real dreams when she seen 'em, and was enough of a woman still to appreciate 'em.

SO FROM that day on Toombes—Tombstone Toombes, the boys called him, once they found out about his dream—lived with Ma Hawkins, bunking in a back room, and doing odd jobs about the town to pay for his feed and liquor. But he never went into the hills to hunt for gold again, even though Ma could tell that now and then the gold-hunting fever hit him hard, and tempted him to forget his dream. Even when the strike come in the hills back of Silver City, and they began to take gold out of the hills he'd tromped so long, he didn't leave the town to go look for it. He knew he was getting old; he knew the death he'd met and outwitted so many times before was coming for him again, and he was determined that when it caught up with him, he'd die to have his dream come true.

Ma Hawkins herself had less and less time to get him out of trouble.

With the gold strike the little town of Silver City boomed, and her boarding house, which had been nigh empty for many a year, again began to fill up. Not with broken down loafers this time, but with big tycoons from St. Louis and New York, and with prospectors who'd struck it rich in the hills, and had money flowing from every pocket.

Silver City had been a small place before the gold strike come: two saloons, a general store—with the post office in it—and Ma Hawkins' boarding house and cafe. There wasn't no bank there; there'd never been any use for a bank, with Salt City only a hundred miles away, and nobody living in the hills but grubstake gold-hunters like Tombstone Toombes.

But now, with all that gold rolling out of the yellow-rich hills, there was desperate need of a place to stow it. Big shots from Salt City moved into town, and carpenters went to work building a bank. And while they were building it, the tycoons used Ma's safe. It was a huge, solid-looking affair, that some troupe of stage-actors had left in the rear room when they went broke in Silver City and disbanded. They kept the gold there, where the tycoons from the east and the gold rich prospectors from the hills could keep an eye on it.

All this activity was near driving Tombstone crazy. It wasn't the finding of the gold that made him mad—nor the idea that he'd stumbled over the mother lode a hundred times, and never noticed it. Not that, 'cause he'd found mother lodes himself, in his time, and knew the excitement. It was the fact that all them paying customers crowding Ma Hawkins place had edged him right out of his room and bed.

He slept for a week in the new livery stable; then, when he most set fire to the place one night when he was drunk, the owner drove him off, and he went back to Ma's, begging for a room.

Ma Hawkins had gone money-wild, too, after seeing all that gold flowing into her safe, and she shoved memory of his dream out of her heart, and told him she couldn't carry him no longer.

Where he slept after that, no one knew. He'd disappear each night, and show up again next morning, looking fresh as a daisy, showing he'd found a good bunking place somewhere—but no one could figure out where.

THEY kept digging the gold outta the hills, and crowding it into Ma's safe. A mammoth safe it was, too—bigger by far than anyone had ever seen before—but even it was now half full of pokes of gold dust, and near to busting with wealth. Ma and the tycoons figured it'd be a powerful temptation for someone to try and rob the safe, so they kept a shotgun guard over it all night and allowed no one to put gold in it after dark, for fear someone'd sneak up while it was being opened, and hold them up. It was set against the wall in the rear room, and the tycoons wanted to move it into the front, where it'd be easier watched, but Ma talked 'em out of it. Said it'd been sitting against that wall for going on twenty years, and she wasn't going to move it now.

It was natural that some of the gold-hunters who drifted into town and staked out claims—and found nothing but hard work and sweat for their troubles should begin to eye that crowded safe, and wonder could it be busted. It looked too strong to bust; it looked like it'd withstand dynamite and powder; but when news come through that the building for the new bank was almost finished, and a new safe was coming in from St. Louis, two gold-diggers who'd found nothing decided the golden wealth in the safe warranted a try.

They worked it slick. They planned and planned, and come up finally with what seemed a foolproof idea. They figgered it was no use trying to blast the safe—it looked far too powerful—so one night they sneaked up and set fire to one of the saloons. While everybody was down trying to put out the fire, and save the new buildings that had went up fast and rickity, the two knocked the shotgun guard on the head. They snagged Ma Hawkins as she come bounding out of her room and told her, plain and

truthful, that unless she opened that safe she'd be occupying a spot in boot-hill herself.

She was a tough woman, Ma was, tough and hard and with plenty of nerve, but she knew mean men when she saw 'em, and she knew when there was no use fighting. She protested—she tried to fight—but after they hit her once or twice she knelt afore the safe, twirled the combination lock, and swung the door open.

What happened then Ma couldn't believe, nor could the two bad men who were standing behind her. From that safe, that mammoth locked safe that looked too tough to crack, there erupted a small, scrawny figure that lashed into the bigger of the two bandits, sending him reeling with the fury of his attack. The big one staggered back, tripped over his own feet; then Tombstone had his gun, and was whirling toward the other.

It all happened so fast Ma never had time to make a move. The big one was down, Tombstone had his gun, and whirling, he blasted away at the other. He hit him, Tombstone did; after sixty years he knew how to handle a gun. But so did the other jasper, who had notches on his hogleg to prove it. Tombstone got him, fair and square—straight in the heart—but he took a bullet in his own chest doing it.

IT WASN'T a bad way to die though, Tombstone told Ma afore he passed on. It was the way he'd always dreamed of going: in the midst of people, fighting for his life, not expiring in agony away out in the hills with no one to care. And too, like the feller he was, he apologized to Ma for using her safe as a sleeping place.

He'd found out, while fooling around Ma's, what Ma had known all along. She'd never allowed the safe to be moved 'cause the show folks who left it there had been magicians, and the safe, for all its powerful looks and seemingly unblastable steel, was nothing but a prop for a magic show. It had a back that opened out, so when the magician locked a man in it—on stage—he could get out through the trapdoor in the rear.

Tombstone had found it quite by accident. He'd tried to sneak into Ma's boarding house through a loose board in the rear, and when he got inside, found he was inside the safe. It had been a comfortable sleeping place, though a bit crowded, and he'd spent the rest of his nights there.

Tombstone passed on, all right, but with a grin on his face and a happy smile in his heart. And those big tycoons, and those gold-rich prospectors from the hills, they gave him a funeral the likes of which Silver City had never seen—and would never see again. And Ma Hawkins, from her own pocket, sent off to St. Louis for a personal tribute to a man's last dream.

That's why, when you visit boot-hill, just on the outskirts of Silver City—you'll find a sight that's strange indeed among the rubble and boulders that mark most of the graves. An angel, chiseled from solid marble, full size as in life standing, gleaming and polished, with wings outspread, above the grave of old Tombstone Toombes—a man with a dream.

THE END

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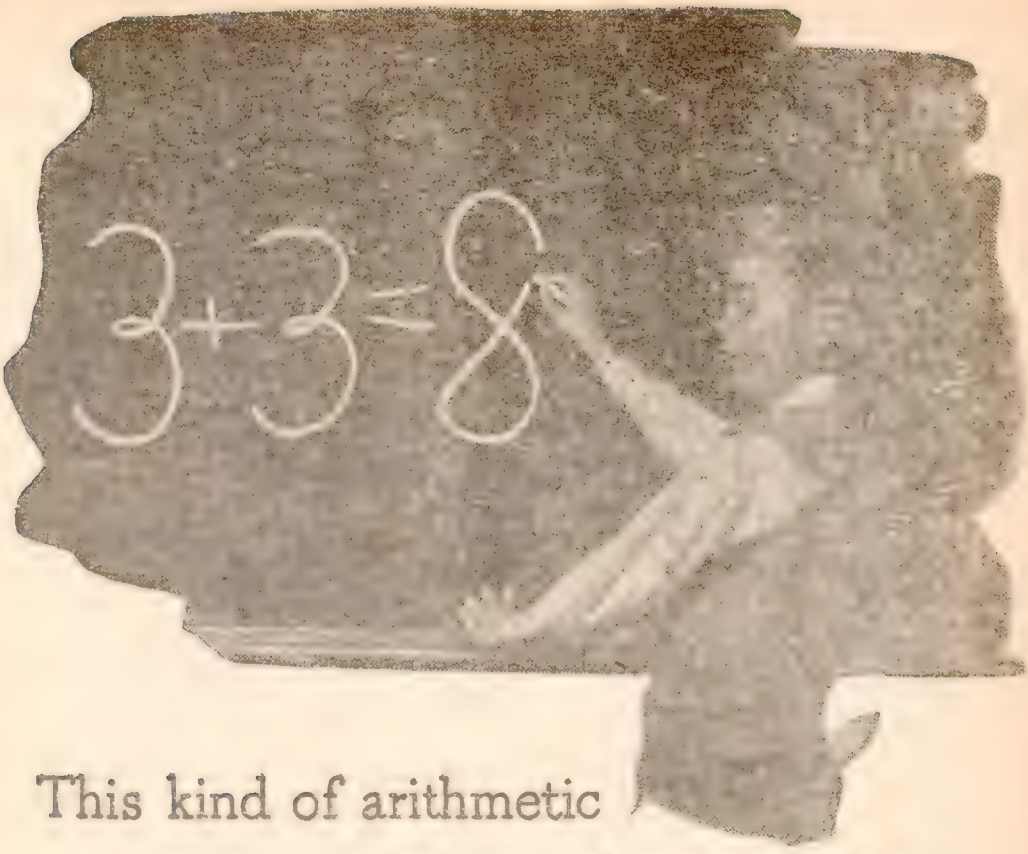

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Gun Trail Code

Complete Novelet

Whatever personal differences might be between them, Cy Roberts knew that Bones Tangley would never let him stand alone against a lobo outfit, and Cy wasn't going to desert Bones now. Even though Roberts had stolen Bones' woman, and there'd be gunsmoke between them later!

THERE WAS a ghost out there on that desert trail, the ghost of Bones Tangley. Tangley wasn't dead, Cy Roberts knew, neither was he anywhere near them. But the sweating half-blinded Roberts, as he dragged his body across the sands, could feel the presence of the big dangerous lawman at times. And at other moments he could see his towering raw-boned figure with its rocky face and shock of hair black as a curse in the shimmer of the heat devils that danced from the dunes. Sometimes Tangley's face was a contorted mask of vengeance-starved fury. And, strangely, at other times, the great head would be thrown back, the lips ripped wide in a grimace of silent jeering laughter. That last was what Roberts couldn't understand, because he had stolen Tanglev's woman.

Sweat rivered out of his soaked eyebrows, stung his eyeballs and blinded him a moment. He stumbled over the sun-bleached, bare-boned skeleton of the horse at the edge of the faint trail. The guns at his hips, even the slight weight of his once

By ABEL SHOTT

creamy sombrero seemed to drag him inexorably down to all fours like an animal. With an almost incredible effort he forced himself erect at once, rocking backward. He feared that if he rested on the burning-hot sand too long he would lose the will to rise, would surrender. Fighting for balance, he went stumbling forward, rocking like a soggy-legged drunkard in his high-heeled boots. Then he brought himself to a halt, the leathern water bag banging, banging like a humanly-inspired thing against his side.

He waited till the woman on the horse drew abreast, then twisted his eyes up to her, hooding them against the fierce orb of the sun. "How are you, Martha?" he asked in the thin dried-up voice of an aged man. The heat and the desert could do that to a human critter, could suck the life fluid from his veins till he felt as old as those jagged peaks far off to the east.

Her mouth twisted with loathing for him before she replied. Then spat out: "Oh, I feel wonderful! *This* is just the kind of a honeymoon I'd looked forward to, Cy."

He bridled at her caustic tongue.

"You knew there was—was danger," he threw back, manipulating the thick black wedge that was his tongue with difficulty. "Just because things ain't soft and pretty every moment, your nerve—" Then he got a grip on himself. The worst thing they could do now would be to fight.

But he stood staring at her another moment out of his inflamed puckered eyes. It was as if a veil had been torn from them. Back in that dance hall under the soft glow of the oil lamps, the flaming red hair that hung in a bunch of soft curls at her neck had been ravishing. But now the curls were gone. Instead it dangled in stringy moist strands down on her shoulders and about her face. There was an artificial look to it too, as if perhaps it were dyed. He realized she was not really so beautiful after all.

"We gotta hang on," he said woodenly. "We'll make Jalisco by nightfall." And plodded on.

SHE SPOKE to the calico horse, then there was the angry swish of her quirt. The bogged-down animal moved. There was the slow steady creak of saddle leather, the scrath of that little carpetbag of hers, slung from the saddle horn, as it rubbed against the pony's body. Just that and the constant suck of Cy Roberts' boots as he dragged one after the other from the sand for another stride. And the two figures, infinitesimal, like insignificant insects under the leaden cradle of sky, crawled on southward down the Devil's Stretch as that strip of veritable hell was known.

"If only she hadn't killed her horse," Roberts said to himself over and over again. "If only she hadn't.. if only she hadn't..." It became a wild thing, a kind of maddening refrain that possessed him. He tried to still it. He began to think back to how it all had started. Back to when he had sloped into Big Iron, never suspecting he was going to steal another man's woman.

He was Cy Roberts, rekowned as one of the fastest leather-slappers ever to have come out of the Panhandle. But though a gunman, he had never hit the owlhoot, never been a wanted man. He had hired himself out to clean up bad towns, to burn down or run the trigger-slammer scum out of hell-holes. Vigilante groups and citizens committees contracted him. And they said that when Roberts finished a job, your town was as quiet and serene as a Baptist Sunday school meeting. But after a spell, he'd realized he wanted something better. So he had come into Big Iron with a bankroll in his money belt thick enough to choke a bull and the proclamation that he was hanging up his law-bringing shooting irons. He was going out to Frisco and open up a dancehall there with a partner.

Then he had seen Martha Lowing. He had been having a quiet drink in the dancehall when she had burst into that ballad. He had turned around and it had been like having a new vista of life opened up for him. It was like seeing the new-risen sun burst over a hill after the dawn. She was a little taller than him with an hour-glass waist and a kind of regal bearing thst awed the hangers-on. Her face was softness incarnate, reminding him of the picture of an angel he had once seen on a church window up in St. Louis. And there was the frame of the red hair like flowing flame. He'd ignored the coldness of the blue eyes that might have been stones in a mask.

THE SECOND night, when he had stayed over a day just to see her, men had warned him. She was Bones Tangley's girl, engaged to wed the man who was the town marshal of Big Iron. Roberts knew Tangley slightly, had met him a couple of times when their trails of duty had crossed. Had always admired him. Tangley was a tophand trigger slammer and absolutely fearless himself, a man-breaker if one ever had carried the Law down the out-trails. A man with a tiger's temper too. They told Roberts that Tangley had made a gold strike and was fairly wealthy, that he was going to retire in a few weeks and marry this woman.

But Cy Roberts had looked at Martha Lowing again and not cared

a hoot. He couldn't seem to help himself. He told her his plans, how he was going to 'Frisco to settle down. He could still remember how her eyes had opened wide and how she'd breathed, "A city!" Then the soft doll-like face had saddened. "I wish I were going," she'd murmurred. Almost before he realized it, they had decided to go together. She would throw over Tangley, they would steal out secretly...Tangley was away on business...They'd get wedded in Turner's Junction, go out on the railroad from there.

They had slipped off on the early-morning stage that passed through. He could recall clearly, despite how the sun had numbed the inside of his skull, the numerous pieces of baggage she'd had, that one small carpet bag she'd refuse to let away from her, clutching it as they rode. And then things had started to go wrong.

They had hit Turner's Junction at sundown and almost stepped into Bones Tangley's arms. En route back to Big Iron, Tangley was sitting his pony there in the yard of the stage station as the coach pulled in, talking to a man. There was nothing to do but remain on the stage and ride on westward with it. Roberts wasn't afraid of the marshal, never yet had he seen the man he couldn't whip on the draw. But he no more wanted to kill Tangley than he wanted to be killed by him. He—

The sobbing had a harsh unreal sign on the terrible stillness of the desert. It was an effort to even stop. In turning he almost stumbled into the spines of a cactus stalk. Plucking at the shirt that was sweat-glued to his body that stung from the salt of the constant perspiration, he blinked till he could focus his eyes on her. For some seconds in the heat waves that wrinkled up from the desert floor, there seemed two-three of her some yards apart. Then he realized she was a number of strides to the rear. She was slumped over the horn as the calico horse swayed on spread fore legs, refusing to go any further.

HE WENT back. It seemed terrible to take even a step backward when there were so many to go forward. He spoke to the animal, patting its head. Then he unslung the waterbag and carefully poured a little into his hat and held it to the muzzle of the poor beast. He twisted his eyes up to her. Martha Lowing watched, mouth peeled back over her teeth, as if he were giving away her gold.

Knots of muscle began to pulsate at the hinges of his jaw. He toted that waterbag himself because earlier in the day, when it had been slung on the saddle horn, he had discovered her stealing swigs from it. It hadn't been a nice thing to see in the woman you loved,. The venom in her face when she saw she was caught...

The cayuse knocked the sombrero from his hand, greedily nuzzling for more. When he bent to recover the hat, he swayed dizzily. A thousand replicas of that sun, like a coppery human baleful eye above, danced before his blurred vision, then fused and seemed to explode inside his brain.

"Damn you, we'll die out here!" she screamed suddenly. "You little rat, you've led me out here to die! Die!"

Cy Roberts galvanized. To be called little had always been anathema to him. Perhaps it was because at home his three brothers had been strappling six-footers who teased him about his size. Actually he was just under medium size, flat as a board in the body. Wide shoulders out of proportion made him seem shorter than he was. He had a small large-nosed face that gave him a bantam rooster effect. But it was his eyes that could stop men dead in their tracks when he literally almost plunged them into a gent. Men said they could be fiery hot and yet chill as ice at the same time with those strange green pupils.

They stabbed into the almost hysterical woman once. Wise, she caught the warning, managed a wry smile. "Cy, I—I'm sorry. But I don't want to die. I—I want to live—and—and love."

He said, "All right, honey. But every pound counts now. We better get rid of this bag. I'll buy you all the new clothes you want when we get out of this." And he reached for that strangely weighted carpet bag on the saddle horn.

She was like a tigress the way she clawed a hand for the handle and thrust out the other arm to ward him off. "No, no!" she screamed, shaking her head so vehemently the perspiration flew from her face. "I've got to keep this. I've *got* to."

"But—" Then he gave it up, turned and took the calico's bridle and began to tug. After a few moments, the animal took a few reluctant steps. But when he ceased to haul, the pony stopped. Roberts knew what he was in for. Turning his sunken face doggedly to the south, he started up the long slope of a dune, dragging the horse along.

That refrain started through his aching brain again. "If only she hadn't killed her horse...If only she hadn't..." To still it anew he went back to Turner's Junction again, to where they'd seen Tangley.

THEY HAD continued on westward in the stage coach to the next town, some thirty odd miles up the creek. Then he had hired ponies and they had pushed north to Scoville, the pueblo north of Turner's Junction on the rail line. They'd get a train there. Only they never did.

Acting on a vague premonition, Roberts had slipped into the place alone. And he had found George Tangley, the marshal's cousin, there with a posse watching the railroad station. They had cut up from Big Iron in the southeast, crossing the desert, to intercept them. When Roberts high-tailed it back to the woods where he had left her, she had let the third horse with her baggage loaded on it, stray off. And she had flown into a tantrum when he'd insisted there was no time to recover the animal then. Grabbing her bridle, he had dashed into a draw bending southward and later cut out into the desert. It was then the first ugly thorn of doubt about her had pricked his mind.

"Why are you taking me out onto the desert?" she'd demanded, icy-voiced, holding that carpetbag attached to her saddle horn. "How did you know it was George Tangley back there?"

He'd had to explain that he had met George with Bones Tangley a couple of years back up in the Mogollones when the marshal was tracking down the Trencher Bunch. That time when Bones Tangley had put out the lights of two of Bat Trencher's brothers.

After that they had headed across the Devil's Stretch. A day and a half's ride would take them to the safety of the hills that formed the eastern barrier. Would have if she hadn't killed her horse. If she hadn't—

Bones Tangley was laughing at him again. He was standing there beside that piece of outcropping lava, arms, akimbo, head throan back on his bull neck, laughing like mad. Roberts stopped dragging the horse, hand feebly plunging for a gun. The woman's voice lashed him from behind.

"What's the matter, you fool? What are you looking at?"

The apparition went away. And beyond it Roberts' seared eyeballs made out that clump of stunted trees dominated by a drunkenly leaning butte that marked the waterhole on this southern trail. He babbled something about it and dragged the pony off at a tangent toward it. Things would be better when they got water. Then they'd make it sure. Everything would be all right. Maybe his sun-tortured brain had only been imagining things about her.

She dropped off and ran ahead before they reached the trees. Dimly he wondered why the pony, scenting water, didn't try to stampede for it. He caught an animal-like cry from her. He pushed into the clump. She stood over the hole, a little spot in banks of clay, waving clenched hands at heaven. Then she turned and clawed fistfuls of his shirt and tried to shake him. He still stared, unbelieving, at the baked little crater, de-

void of even damp mud, that had been the waterhole.

"You're afraid of him—afraid of Bones Tangley!" she screeched, tearing his blue shirt. "That's why I'm out here dying! Because you are yellow—yellow as a cur dog! Because you had to run from Bones!"

CHAPTER II

ROBERTS NEVER did remember clearly getting started again after that. He just found himself going along, the reins over his shoulder, dragging the recalcitrant calico as if for eternity. It was as if he couldn't stop. Any more than he could stop thinking about that horse she had killed.

It hao happened near the end of the first day on the desert. They hadn't had time to refill the canteens before heading out onto it. It had been a strain on her. And when they'd sighted the first waterhole. she'd spurred her pony, given it its head. Roberts had shouted after her in vain. Let a horse get too much water out there on the desert, let it drink till its belly almost burst, and it would get deathly sick. When h. did reach the waterhole after her, it was worse than he had feared.

She had seen and was trying to fight the blaybank back from the well-filled hole in the nest of rocks. He finally did back it away after striking it twice over the skull for its own good. And that fresh-painted little sign at the other side of the pool seemed to leer at them. It had been marked "Poison." Inside of an hour, he animal's belly began to bloat. It started to reel in circles. A short white later, it was dead. Putting her in the saddle of his own calico, he had begun that terrible marching.

That night he had fled from a showdown with Bones Tangley again. "Fled" was the way she would have put it, he supposed. Despite the fact he was doing the walking, he had wanted to push on through the chill of the desert night. But she had protested she was too played out.

"Besides, they don't know where we are now, Cy." She had twined her arms about his neck. "Everything will be all right, my love."

At midnight they'd found that little gulch in the Stretch. It was at the branching of the trail where the offshoot from the one to the east bent southward to Jalisco. She slept, nestled in his lap as he sat, dozing now and again. Then there were hoofs on the hardpan. But it was not George Tangley, the cousin, with the posse. And from the first he had been puzzled by the idea of sending a posse after an eloping man and woman.

IT HAD BEEN Bones Tangley himself, a big forboding figure in the kak. Unaware of their presence he had ridden on by, taking the eastern fork of the branch. Nobody would imagine any hombre in his senses trying to make the long trek to Jalisco with a woman along. But inside of an hour, that was what he, Roberts, had done. There was no alternative. The odds were now heavily against the manyway. When Tangley reached that settlement at the eastern rim of the desert, he would know they had not gone through and come doubling back, cut to the south. And they only had one pony....

A little before dawn, he had come upon the waterhole on the south trail. Brackish and muddy, there had not been enough there to slake their thirsts completely when he insisted on filling one of the waterbags. Then this unending purgatory of a day hac begun.

He drew up, twisting his head around with frantic eagerness. Somebody was calling to them. He tried to still the pound of his heart so he could hear the words. "If only she hadn't killed her own horse," they said. And then he knew it was himself who was talking aloud. That was the danger sign, the sign a man was losing his own mind under the flail of the desert sun.

Luck saved them later that day. A trio of cowhands, cutting back across the southern tip of the Devil's Stretch after having been on the search for strays in the hills to the east, came upon them. They had

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filled canteens and plenty of grub in their saddle bags. And they took them on into sleepy Jalisco as twilight blanketed the day, Roberts riding double with one of them.

Jalisco was a salty pueblo, a jumble of shacks and box-like stores with a main road where honky tonks and whisky mills jostled each other for space. More of them elbowed out a side road in the shadow of the frowning bluff at whose base the yellowish river ran. It was on the side that Roberts found the tumble-down ranshackle hotel. He took two separate rooms there, registering the woman as his sister. Luck seemed with them again when he was told the semi-weekly stage, which connected with the railroad division point some seventy odd miles to the southeast, passed through at three in the morning. Just a few hours and they would be rolling out of Bones Tangley's reach.

ROBERTS had some grub sent up from a nearby Mex restaurant. They bolted it, speaking little. Then he said he was going to catch some shuteye and that he would call her in time to make the stage and went to his room. The creaky iron cot seemed as soft as a cloud when he flung his wracked body onto it. It was a little after midnight when he woke. He doused the desert grime and dried sweat from his face and shoulders, combed his hair, strapped on his gunbelt. He still felt the after-effects of that terrible desert trek. His feet most of all, being sore and blistered. But though small, he was wire-tough with an iron constitution.

He took a couple of stiff slugs from the bottle of redeye he'd had sent in, then prepared to go out for a looksee. He figured to keep an eye peeled till stage time in case Bones Tangley sloped in. Opposite Martha's door he hesitated; he didn't want to waken her. He rapped lightly, tentatively, to let her know he was going out. Before his knuckles touched the door a second time she called out clearly:

"Come in, Cy."

Instead of being in bed, she was

(Continued On Page 98)

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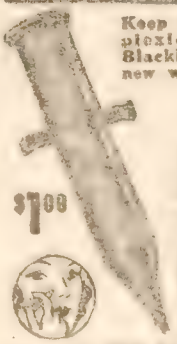

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seated by the window, the lamp lighted. He stared, blinking, recalling that venomous-faced vicious-eyed woman who'd called him a yellow dog at that dried-up waterhole. Because the contrast was so great now.

Her face was hollowed and still haggard from what she'd undergone. But she had bathed, her flaming red hair was caught in a simple tight roll at the nape of her neck, no longer stringy and straggling. And she wore a fresh starched blue calico dress she had gotten from the proprietress of the hotel.

"Hello,Cy, dear..." She rose slowly. She was smiling but there was a vague clouded look about her. "How—how did you ever get us in off that desert, Cy?"

He blinked, not quite understanding. Told her how they had run into the cow waddies after leaving that last dried-up waterhole. She rubbed her forehead.

"The dried-up waterhole, Cy...I don't remember that."

"What?"

She leaned against the end of the bed, talking softly, hesitantly, as if ashamed of what she had to tell. "You'd find out sometime, Cy, I suppose. Maybe—maybe you won't want to marry me after this. Sometimes my mind..." Shock, she said, blanked out her mind completely. She simply went into a dazed stupor. It was at the death of her mother they had first discovered it. "For weeks after it, I didn't recognize anybody around me—my own family. I didn't even know my own name, Cy. It isn't insanity. Really it isn't. It—well, my mind just seems to be like—like in a fog. I remember being responsible for the death of my horse out there on the desert....And that's all. Everything after that is a blank for me...The shock, you see.... Maybe now—"

Cy Roberts let out his breath in a rush. "Thank Gawd, Martha. Thank Gawd!"

She smiled wanly. "When I was in that condition, did I say anything about my wedding gift to you, Cy?"

He shook his head. "No, Martha. A gift?"

She tapped the carpetbag on the

chair beside the bed. "Yes...I've been saving money for some years. Not much—but well, it comes to a tidy little sum. After we're married, I want to put it with yours—for us. My—my dowry, you might call it." She blushed like a shy schoolgirl.

ROBERTS WAS on her and sweeping her into his arms then. He didn't see how he could ever have doubted her. Out there in the desert, she hadn't been in her right mind. She quivered in his grip and lifted her mouth submissively. A dry sob came from his. How could he ever have doubted her!

When they finally stood apart, he became aware of the heightened tempo of the town. There was more yelling down on the main drag. A gun popped and runken laughter welled as the report waned. He told her he was going out to have a look around without mentioning Bones Tangley's name. Told her to get to bed and he would call her in time for that pre-dawn stage.

Going out and down to the main road he could still taste the softness of her lips, smell the scent of her hair. A man ran up the steps of a nearby cabin, calling to his wife as he yanked open the door.

"Close up the shutters, Sarah! Quick!" There was worried urgency in his voice.

Down near the corner, he spoke to two gents hurrying away from the main line, asking them what was the matter. They barely broke stride to answer.

"Bat Trencher's hit town!...Better pull in your horns and lie low. Trencher—the outlaw, pilgrim! He's raising hell in general."

"Why don't you stop him?"

"Shucks, man, there ain't no Law in Jalisco, and he's got a parcel of his gun toughs with him." They hurried on into the darkness.

ROBERTS, moving with that soft and gliding step of his, turned into the main street in time to see a flung bottle come through the window of a honky tonk. Inside, tall

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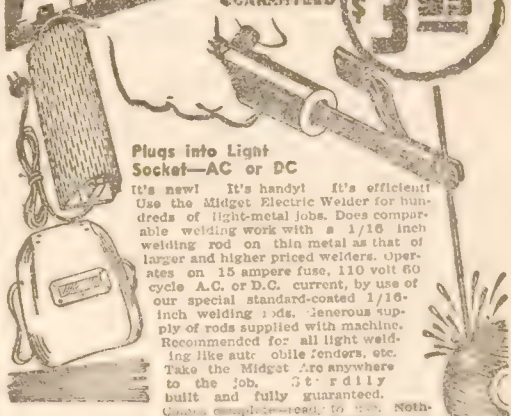

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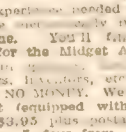

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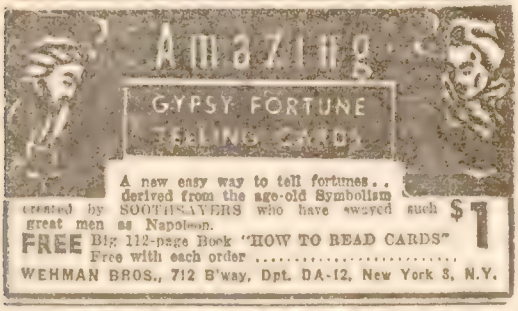

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(Continued From Page 99)

rail-thin red-headed Bat Trencher himself was leading the scared three-piece orchestra and yelling for louder music. Several of his men were bellied up to th bar. Further along, in a whisky mill, a couple of Trencher gun slicks were pitching the drink wrangler over the bar and grabbing bottles. Cy Roberts eased his guns a little looser in their scabbards. But he wanted no trouble. After all, he had no quarrel with Trencher.

Over to the southeast a big melon of yellow moon cruised a cloudless sky, mocking the black night with its revealing glow. Three roistering outlaws came along and Roberts sidled off the walk to let them pass. Once he smiled lopsidedly, thoughtfully. Just before he had left her, Martha had told him it was a little over a thousand dollars she had saved up. She was a wonderful woman. "A wonderful woman," he repeated softly, coming to the Mex settlement of huddled dobies where the road led away north toward the desert.

The alkali band of the road, straight as a crow's flight, was like a yellowish ribbon under the moon, unmarried by a single dark spot that might be an incoming rider. Musing, Roberts lighted up a quirly. A few more hours and they'd be safe. Then—

There was a commotion up the line. Sounds of a scuffle. A man yelled, "I'm one of Bat Trencher's boys! Better leave me 'lone less'n you wanta git a window in your skull...." Things quieted down again.

Roberts leaned against a tree, watching that trail. "Mebbe," he said half aloud, "Bones Tangley didn't figure we'd dare to take the south trail down the Stretch and—" Then his teeth snapped together and he jerked erect.

Bat Trencher and Bones Tangley! They were mortal enemies. Roberts recalled how Tangley had cut down two of Trencher's brothers in that running battle up in the Mogollones. And if Tangley came riding in here alone, off guard, right smack in amidst Bat Trencher and his pack...

(Continued On Page 102)

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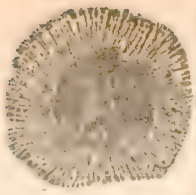

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(Continued From Page 100)

CHAPTER III

GY ROBERTS found himself treading nervously back up the road, trying not to think. He paused once in the inky blackness beneath the giant eucalyptus tree, fisted hands working. On his right was a little down-at-the-heel barroom with a single low-turned light inside. A Trencher gunman came swaying through its batwing doors and headed up for the heart of the peublo. He looked back, mistook Roberts for one of the outfit and called:

"Guzzle while you can, pard! Bat says we're pulling stakes come sun-up." He went on along.

Roberts walked back to the other end of the road, to the blacksmith's barn, checking on the barrooms and the big honky honk where Trencher's men were. As near as he could estimate, Trencher had at least a good ten leather-slappers along with him. Against them, Bones Tangley, unwarned, would have his ticket punched to Boothill before he could spit twice.

The man who had stolen Tangley's woman paced about, arguing it out with himself as the night wore away. Twice he started up to the boarding house, turned back. He stepped into the honky tonk to check the time. The big clock over the bar told him it was one-thirty in the morning. He went down and watched the trail up from the desert for a spell. A cool wind whisked up out of the arroyo to the south. But beads of sweat pimpled his forehead and the palms of his hands were greasy with it as he fought his inner battle.

"The devil with Tangley!" he muttered once. "You've got that woman and...."

But a woman had no place in this, somehow. It was a man-to-man thing. He told himself that Bones Tangley had done him no favors, that he owed Tangley nothing. But it was over and beyond that, it was sort of an unwritten code, a code of the man-hunters. He and Bones Tangley had both dedicated years of their life to

bringing law to these rough violent outposts of the Southwest. Had forked lonely bitter-long trails after killers, often outnumbered.

"If Bones Tangley sloped into a place and saw me against a wall fronted by a pack of lobos, he'd—" His voice broke off. He didn't have to tell himself what the fearless bellicose Tangley would do.

THERE WAS no evading the issue. Though Tangley might hate his innards now, there was a bond between them, intangible but none the less present and demanding. To let Tangley ride into this nest of killers would be the same as letting a blind man stumble into a bottomless pit. But if he waited to warn Tangley— The answer to that was obvious too.

Still walking about, watching that road from the desert, he tried to tell himself Tangley mightn't be coming at all. But he knew better. Bones Tangley had the stubbornness of a mule, the persistence of a bulldog. Roberts forgot time, everything but his problem. He was surprised when he caught the rattle of the stage coach coming across the night from the cut in the west. Once he saw it on a sharp rise. Then it was swinging down the road by the bluff where the hotel stood, the planks of the river bridge still echoing heavily in its wake. He was at the corner when the skinner hauled his double team of mules to a halt in front of the big General Merchandise Store, closed now.

"I could tell the skinner to wait a few minutes, run up and waken Martha," he said to himself. But he stood rooted to the spot as he watched a white-bearded old man clamber down out of the coach. There was no interference from the Trencher bunch. They were out for a night of roistering, that was all.

Then the skinner snapped his blacksnake whip over the heads of the lead team. The coach rocked over a bump in the road and headed eastward, creaking and groaning. In a couple of minutes, it twisted from sight among the trees of the trail running east. Cy Roberts let out his

(Continued On Page 104)

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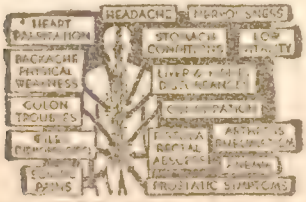

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(Continued From Page 103)

breath. He had made his decision almost without knowing it. He headed back to watch the road in from the desert.

Passing the barroom by the big eucalyptus, he cut his eyes in. He halted as suddenly as if he had come against a stone wall in the dark. Inside it was dim. But there was no mistaking the big raw-boned form, the massive head thrown back as the man dumped down a drink. Bones Tangley!

He had slipped in by some other route than the main trail, Roberts realized. Then he found himself gliding inside. The drink wrangler was roaring at something the big marshal of Big Iron had said. So Roberts was unheard as he moved down along the other wall opposite the bar to leave fighting room. Tangley might start the fight on sight. Behind him, he stopped.

"Tangley."

"I'm watching you, Cy Roberts."

And then Roberts spied the little round mirror on the back wall of the bar, half obscured by the necks of bottles lined before it. Saw too the Tangley's left hand was jammed down over his left holster. The man had been ready at any moment. Slowly Roberts brought up his hands and folded them on his chest in plain view.

"The gunplay has to wait, Tangley," he said evenly. "Because Bat Trencher is in this peublo with half a score of his boys at least."

TANGLEY swapped directions in one sudden hop almost unbelievable for so large a man. He had a controlled but heavy voice, a reflection of his own iron determination. "Is this a trick, Roberts? Are you—no, you wouldn't be here if it weren't so! Trencher, huh?" His nostrils flared.

Roberts nodded. They measured eyes. Tangley said:

"You got through across the desert all right, both of you?"

"We got through," Cy Roberts told him.

Tangley nodded. Then his face jerked hard. "Trencher ain't going to have my scalp at his belt." He

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 104)

started for the door without any false heroics. Ten-eleven to one was too much. He was getting out. Then he halted in mid-stride, able to see over the top of the batwings. "My pony ain't at the hitchrail any more."

That was the tipoff. Bat Trencher had discovered Tangley's presence in Jalisco. Bones Tangley's breathing was plain to the ear. Both men became aware of the abrupt stillness, the pregnant hush, that had fallen over the town. Trencher was coming for the kill. His men were ringing the place. Neither Roberts nor his enemy needed to see it happening; they knew. Tangley nodded as if saying "yes." Sweat drew a gleaming bank down one of his big jaws. He was tough but human. No man likes to die.

And then Cy Roberts took command as he glided back and dropped down at one of the little tables in the almost complete darkness along that other wall. "Stand at the bar and drink—like you didn't expect trouble, Bones....It's your only chance."

Tangley shot him a quick searching look. Then he was over at the bar, refilling his glass from the bottle. Pulling off his sombrero to cover the Colts he had laid on the bar counter. "Country needs some rain, doesn't it?" he said to the goggle-eyed barkeep.

IT HAPPENED fast. Two jiggers swayed in, feigning drunkenness, arguing about who owed the other a drink. Out beyond the open side door, a frog that had been croaking in a pool there broke off. A third man came in the front, walking stiff-legged with tension, acting as if he did not know the others. Outside on the plank walk cautious-moving boots creaked. The pained stillness almost hurt the eardrums.

"Give ever'body in the house a drink on me," called out one of the gents who seemed orey-eyed. He added to Tangley, "Have one on me, pilgrim! Sure!" None of them saw Roberts back behind that table, a mere vague darker spot against his background. Or the gun he had already levelled under the table.

Bones Tangley nodded and lifted

his glass as if to drain it. The trio of newcomers had fingers inching for the holsters, then darting. Cy Roberts' one weapon blasted a harsh "No!" as its muzzle flash sliced from beneath the table. With the crash came a scream of pain as the hombre lurking in the gloom beyond the side door past the end of the bar staggered back, hit. And the second bolt out of the blue came when Bones Tangley, supposedly unwarned, plucked that big smokewagon from under his hat and turned it on.

Roberts' second gun chimed in as he hosed lead too. One of the trio went down with a smashed knee, rolling against the bar front. The third man who'd entered reeled out through the batwinds, blood streaming from his face. But Bat Trencher had stacked the deck well. A shutter of a front window was jerked wide and lead searched the interior. Several guns tore chunks out of the swinging batwings, ripped splinters out of the top of the bar. A slug angled through Roberts' hat brim just over his eyes. And Bones Tangley lurched backward, blood staining the forearm of his left sleeve, the gun in that hand bouncing on the floor.

wings, rippe dsplinters out of the top of the bar. A slug angled through Roberts' hat brim just over his eyes. And Bones Tangley lurched backward, blood staining the forearm of his left sleeve, the gun in that hand bouncing on the floor.

"Bones!" The next moment Roberts had extinguished the lone lamp with a chimney-smashing bullet. And he was darting for the side door, big Tangley thundering after him.

Outside they started for the rear. The eucalyptus shadowed everything in inky blackness on that side of the barroom. Ugly jagged stab of flame from a muzzle at the back corner of the building tore a hole in the blackness. The two law-bringers triggered simultaneously. There was no more shooting from that corner. But they turned off from the rear, knowing others of the Trencher bunch might be planted there. Turned into the high weeds of the open

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 107)

ground beside the littl whisky mill at the end of the main road. Going around the pool there, Bones slipped and one of his boots splashed into the water heavily. A slug whistled just over their heads.

THEY RAN through a thin clump of scrawny cottonwoods. Bones grabbed Roberts' shoulder and pointed out beyond the rear of the clump where the backyards stretched. Men, just an occasional sombrero and a shoulder bobbing up an instant, were running along a parallel fence, keeping down in the grass. And the pair knew others were working along with them out in the road.

"The Mex settlement," Roberts whispered. And they were running across a patch of moonlight toward the dirty-white dobies huddled at the edge of the town. Cy Roberts wobbled and limped badly on his sore blistered feet, fell back. Wheeling as he did to cover all side, big Bones dropped back beside him.

Two slugs jetted the sand about them. That was all. Bat Trencher and his gun toughs were working in for dead-shot range. Bones Tangley and Roberts ducked in among the hovels, hurrying along close to seamed yellowish walls. A woman in one place screamed once. That was all. The inhabitants were used to crouching in silence when men went berserk with guns about them. And that ugly-whispering silence settled like an invisible pall once more.

The pair were in a narrow alley that might have been laid out by a meandering grazing cow. To halt them would give the killers a chance to ring them, to work in from several angles. They hugged walls, shrinking from the moonlight. Behind a piece of wood snapped sharply under an unseen boot. The alley bent suddenly and ahead was a long patch of moonlight to where the last crouched hovel stood at the edge of the settlement.

Roberts stopped. "I'm tired of running. It goes against my grain."

"Sure." Bones Tangley sucked air. "Just run a little more—out through that moonlight to draw 'em. I'll be

(Continued On Page 110)

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over there." With his one remaining weapon he indicated the side wall of a dobie where bushes afforded some scant shield.

Cy Roberts understood. It would be a long-shot gamble at leading the lobos into a gun trap. And if they sensed Tangley was lying in wait, he'd be mowed down pronto. It was dangerous for both. There was no argument as the two thumbed fresh cartridges into still hot weapons. Then Roberts was running straight on out the alley, through the strong moonlight.

There was a shout. Three men came racing down the alley. Others cut in, converging from either side. They tore after the limping Roberts. Lead spattered off a white-washed wall close to his elbow. He stumbled once. And they came spilling pell mell into the open moonlight, hot after him, as he lurched against a dobie wall in the narrow shadow of its eave. And the waiting Bones Tangley's gun cut loose with its throaty death chant. One man spun. Another was lifted completely off the ground by the slug that slapped him in the chest. It was just a matter of bloody moments.

For Roberts was doubling back along that wall to throw his smoke-poles into the fray. He sent a man down and rolling over and over like a hit rabbit. Another, in the van, missed him and went diving between two close-set hovels. Tall wire-thin Bat Trencher himself, red head bared, wheeled in to pin the lawman against that side wall, one of his gun toughs at his elbow.

Roberts let out a yelp to draw Trencher's attention, leaping out into view. Tangley spent his last shell at the same instant the deadly Roberts, advancing in a crouch, sent lead spitting from both hands. They never did kow which of them got Bat Trencher. The latter rocked back on his heels, half turned, blood from his head washing away the leather hue of his face. He sank, already lifeless eyes staring at the moon. The gun slick with him caromed against the wall and collapsed, vainly trying to stem the life tide ebbing from

the bullet hole dead center in his chest.

Silence settled back slowly, disturbed only by the occasional furtive steps of those left alive to skulk off. Then there were the clop of departing hoofs.

BONES Tangley and Roberts stood out in the wash of moonlight. In the town nobody yet had dared to poke a head out of a door, fearing the Bat Trencher bunch was raiding. Tangley cleared his throat.

"Martha's here."

Roberts nodded, sleeving a powder-grimed face. "At the hotel—waiting for me."

"Waiting?"

"We were supposed to go out on that three o'clock stage. Then I realized you'd walk into the Trencher bunch...I waited," Roberts said drily.

Bones Tangley nodded, understanding completely. He knew that unwritten code too. He took it for granted. Said heavily, "Yes—you waited...That's the way it would be played....But if she's waiting up there for you—that means she went along with you of her own free will."

Roberts' eyes widened some at that. "She did, of course."

Bones Tangley gave something like a sigh, drawing himself up. "That's all I wanted to know...If it's that way, that's all there is to it."

Roberts raked his face searchingly. "You mean that?"

"If she chose you, that's all..." Tangley's mouth wrenched. "Only, I want the forty thousand of mine she took along."

"The forty thousand of yours..."

"You didn't know?"

Roberts swore softly. "No...But how—"

"It was my payoff from that gold strike. I'd sold out. It was in the safe in my marshal's office. Only she kne the combination beside me ....That's why George, my cousin, took the trail with a posse. He found it gone. I want it back, Roberts...I wish she hadn't done *that*," he added sadly.

Roberts spat into the sand. "I wish

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 111)

she hadn't either!" Only he echoed it viciously. "Wait for me at that barroom." He moved off purposefully...

Bones Tangley, his arm bound up, was just putting down his third drink and saying nothing to the curious men who had gathered. Roberts walked ' and slapped the carpetbag before him on the bar.

"There it is....Mebbe you better count it."

Tangley grinned a little. "Not if you say so." Then he saw the bandanna Roberts held against the dripping knife scar on his left cheek. "Where is she now? What—"

"Says come morning she's going to hire a man to drive her over to the railroad," Roberts cut him off.

"Ain't you going back to her?" Tangley was pouring Roberts a drink, not looking at him.

"Figure I can bed down at the livery barn," Roberts said.

Bones Tangley nudged him in the side. "Reckon that's as good a place as any for me too...This drink's on me, Cy."

The next morning the two rode northward up the desert trail out of Jalisco, Bones Tangley and Cy Roberts....

"I think it was you who got Bat," Tangley insisted.

"You shut that flap-jawed mouth, Bones! *You* put Bat Trencher's light out. I saw it plain as day!"

"You're cockeyed, Cy. Your shot.."

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Here's new amazing mouth comfort without risking a single cent . . . enjoy that feeling of having your own teeth again. Its efficaciousness is attested to by hundreds of users who enthusiastically praise Crown Plate Reliner . . . you, too, will join this happy army if you will just try it once. Satisfy your desire for food . . . eat what you want . . . yes, comfortably eat foods you have been deprived of such as steak, corn, apples, etc. Use Crown Plate Reliner and again make eating a pleasure. Remember Crown Reliner tightens false teeth or no cost. Perfect for partials, lowers and uppers.

NOT A POWDER OR PASTE CROWN PLATE RELINER is easy to use.

Don't suffer embarrassment and discomfort caused by loose dental plates. Apply CROWN RELINER. In a jiffy your plate fits like new and stays that way up to 4 months. No old-fashioned heating to burn your mouth. Just squeeze CROWN from tube and put your teeth back in. They'll fit as snugly as ever. Inventor is a recognized authority in dental field. A patent has been applied for CROWN RELINER to protect you from imitators. After you reline your plate with CROWN, take your false teeth out for cleaning without affecting the CROWN RELINER. CROWN RELINER is guaranteed . . . it's harmless. NOT A POWDER OR PASTE! DOES NOT BURN OR IRRITATE. If not satisfied, even after 4 months, return partly used tube for full refund . . . CROWN is a scientific discovery that you use without fuss or bother. Just squeeze it out of the tube onto the plate and in a jiffy your plate will again feel as tight and comfortable as it did when it was new. Order today and enjoy this new oral comfort right away.

WHAT USERS TELL US — READ!

J. Clements of Algonac writes: "My plates were so bad they rattled when I talked. Now I can eat steaks, corn on the cob." E. W. W. of Virginia writes: "I have found Crown Reliner all you claim for it and more." . . . Many more attest to same excellent results. Reline your plates with CROWN. It's tasteless. Has that natural pink color. Order a tube of CROWN RELINER today . . . enough to last a year.

HERE'S OUR FREE OFFER!

CROWN offers you a two-way protection for your plates. Order CROWN RELINER and receive FREE with your order CROWN DENTAL PLATE CLEANER. The DENTAL PLATE CLEANER is easy to use and restores that new freshness to your plates to help keep your mouth clean and germ-free. CROWN CLEANER eliminates without brushing foods that collect in plate corners and crevices. Helps protect plates because no brushing is necessary and therefore the danger of scratching is avoided. You will enjoy the feeling that your breath is sweet and is not "false-teeth offensive". Order today and get your CROWN CLEANER FREE with the CROWN DENTAL PLATE RELINER . . . remember you don't risk a single cent. You must be 100% satisfied, or your money back.

SEND NO MONEY

Try it for 4 months and then return it for a full refund if not satisfied. Order at once and we will include FREE with your order a tube of CROWN DENTAL PLATE CLEANER. You'll be delighted with both . . . and the CROWN CLEANER will make your mouth feel refreshed. Rush coupon sending name and address. Pay postman one dollar for combination plus postage, or send cash and we pay postage. Act now and enjoy this new happiness.

At Your Druggist or Order Direct

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2 Step No. 2— DRY WELL UNDER ELECTRIC BULB

3 Step No. 3—SQUEEZE CROWN RELINER FROM TUBE, SPREAD EVENLY, PUT PLATE BACK IN MOUTH

Order this get this FREE

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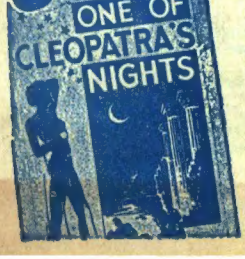

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